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Illustration
泉 Aちき
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Volume 2 (WN)

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2
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この程度にも反応できないとは呆れるしかないな
ライナー・グリフィス
後に「Brave Hearts」の主人公となる少年、12歳。考えるよりも先行動の直情型で後腐れのない真っ直ぐな性格。負けん気が強く人一倍、強くなりたいという思いが強い。
ハロルド・ストークス
日本の大学生が召喚された、ゲーム「Brave Hearts」の悪役キャラ、13歳。喋ったことが自動的に命令不適な口調に変換されてしまう。ゲームの知識を駆使し、自身の死亡フラグと世界の滅亡を避けるために奔走する。
コレット・アレメール
「Brave Hearts」のヒロインの一人、12歳。天才魔法の弟となるはずだったハロルドに憧れを抱き、ライバルのエリカに対抗心を燃やしている。ライナーの幼馴染みとなる。
エリカ・スメラギ
後にライナーの仲間となる、「Brave Hearts」のヒロインの一人、13歳。名門貴族スメラギ家の長女で、ハロルドの婚約者。魔法、特に回復魔法にたけている。ハロルドを毛嫌いしていたが、彼の真意に気付き……。

何から何まで
ゲームと同じではない。
そう考えていたにも
かかわらず、
なぜゲームの通りに
ストーリーが進むと
慢心していたのか――
「なんでコイツがいるんだよ!?」

Chapter 1

「Don't go from the front! Split to the sides and counter-attack!」

In one corner of the normally quiet and peaceful vast expansive grassland, a loud bellow resounded as though tearing through that atmosphere.
The owner of the voice was a robust man, wearing an armor with white as its undertone, who was issuing orders without any break to about 40 soldiers under his command. But the Horn Head's roar easily drowned out his voice.

'Guoooon'- Ringing out through the ground, it was a low and heavy cry which shook the core of the body. The lead colored body was 5 meters long and even it's height exceeded 2 meters, and moreover its feature was the long, thick and rustic horn emerging from its head, from which its name originated. Horn Head was a frenzied monster which would charge using its horn and head hardened to resemble stone, as its weapon. It's appearance was similar to a large rhino wearing iron armor.

Although it was omnivorous, it didn't have any preference to prey on other animals including humans and other monsters. However, it was extremely territory conscious and since there were no monsters which could rival the Horn Head in strength in the surroundings, it had rapidly increased its influence and had extended its territory close to the sphere of human livelihood.
This was the reason they were currently confronting the Horn Head, wanting to subjugate it.

The biggest threat which was it's rush had enough power to easily destroy a single house. If humans were to receive it directly, they probably wouldn't remain alive.
Due to that, although they were trying to finish it by attacking from the sides the Horn Head was preventing them from doing so by swinging its long horn and tail to intimidate the surrounding soldiers.

Although it had suffered some wounds, they weren't enough to dull its movements. And as the combat dragged on, some of the soldiers

also started getting injured.
Fortunately, there was no one who got an injury serious enough for it to become an obstacle in the fight, but if they continued to fight in the current condition, eventually even casualties would occur.
The captain of the soldiers was pondering about what to do.
Suddenly, a small shadow noiselessly passed by beside him.

「P, please wait! It's dangerous!」

When the captain noticed this, he tried to stop the small shadow, but the boy's legs didn't stop.
Without even turning back, the boy addressed the captain.

「Anymore than this is a waste of time. Make all those guys fall back. They'll be nothing but a nuisance」

Listening to that indifferent tone, the man couldn't speak.
The employer of these soldiers was Hayden Stokes. His son, Harold, drew out the sword from the scabbard hanging at his waist.
Different from the soldiers whose defense was strengthened by iron armor, Harold stood in front of the Horn Head while wearing a jacket, tight leather pants and boots which came up till his calves.

As the Horn Head stopped receiving attacks from all sides after the soldiers fell back, the Horn Head's eyes captured Harold's figure.
Against Harold who was calmly closing the distance with unfaltering footsteps, the Horn Head gave out a loud roar. Finally, there was a change in Harold's expression.

「It is said that weaker the dog, louder it howls」

It was neither fear nor nervousness but ridicule. Those eyes were completely looking down on the Horn Head.
That might have provoked it. While wildly howling again, the Horn Head charged at the existence which was much smaller than itself.
The large figure drew near but Harold wasn't perturbed and didn't show any movement to indicate dodging it.

And the instant the distance between the 2 reduced to just a few meters, Harold moved forward.
Immediately a shrill sound resounded. The origin of it was when

Harold's sword and the Horn Head's horn collided the instant they crossed by. The things that conveyed the result of the clash were the Horn Head's cry, different from before, which was filled with pain and the horn, which symbolized it, that had been cut off at the root.

「If I'm not mistaken, blacksmiths will swarm around this guy's horn. Well, it'll only become loose change, but retrieve it」

Harold didn't even spare a glance at the Horn Head which was suffering in agony. It was as though from the start, the Horn Head hadn't even been in his eyes.
But although it was a painful blow, it wasn't fatal. The Horn Head put power into its bent limbs and stood up.

Anger was present in those eyes. As though it wanted to strike with its rage, it howled thrice.

「T, that is!?」

Towards the Horn Head's change, a single soldier raised a surprised voice. A Golden yellow light surrounded its huge body. That was a magic formation.

There were 2 categories of monsters that could use magic. They were either the species that innately excelled at using magic or those which were the strongest within their respective species and had acquired magic during the process of their fast growth.
This Horn Head was the latter. This was proof of it having that much strength.

It raised both it's forelegs. As though it wanted to trample and smash the ground, it struck down with them.
With that as the starting point, fissures ran through the ground in a straight line towards Harold and the ground turned over.

『Grand Punisher』
Although it had an exaggerated name, this intermediate level magic was an earth system magic which would turn over the crust as though to trap and crush the target to death. It's power was high but since the the attack was linear it would be easy to see through it

and if some distance was taken, it wouldn't be hard to evade it.
But against Grand Punisher, Harold charged from the front.

And he leaped just before getting swallowed by the walls of earth.
While kicking the earth walls coming from both sides with his legs alternatively, he ran as though he were sprinting on air.
After crossing about 10 meters, in the end, Harold jumped remarkably high in the air. At a height from where he could look down at the Horn Head.

With a crackling sound, lightning clad the sword held by Harold.

「That's it for your useless struggle」

The sword which was clad with so much electricity that one would think it that the sword blade was shining, Harold swung it down without any hesitation.

「『Thunderbird』」

Instantly, with a roaring sound, a giant bird of lightning fired from the sword attacked the Horn Head as though wanting to swallow it.
The thunderbird, which held enough heat to burn off the eyes those who were watching, pierced the large body.

A bit later after Harold landed, the Horn Head fell down. Many places on the large body were burnt and roasted, and smoke was rising from the whole body.
It didn't even twitch after falling down. The Horn Head's life had completely ended.

「With this, there's nothing more to do here. Quickly finish tidying up」

Without getting a single injury, without even breaking a sweat, Harold who had defeated a huge monster acted as though it was natural and returned back to the carriage. It meant that he had left retrieving the horn and disposing the corpse to them.

After Harold's figure disappeared as the carriage door closed with a snap, finally, the air enveloping them calmed down.
As though it was planned, all of them simultaneously breathed out.

「First squad, retrieve the horn. The remaining squads, dispose the corpse. Work quickly! It's a job suitable for us who bothered Harold-sama for something like this!」

So as to tighten the air that had loosened by a bit, orders from the captain flew out. Among the soldiers who were moving swiftly after receiving those orders, a new recruit in the first squad, which had been given the comparatively easy job of retrieving the horn, still couldn't believe the scene he had just seen and asked his senior.

「Was Harold-sama so strong?」

「Ah, come to think of it, it's the first time for you, huh」

'Then it's no wonder that you would be dumbfounded at that scene', saying that, the questioned soldier, Elias, smiled wryly.

「From about 3 years ago, Harold-sama started accompanying the subjugation expeditions. At that time itself, he was quite strong but now, it's as you can see」

「But is it alright? Even if he is strong, he is still the heir to the Stokes family, so if by some chance he were to get injured……」

「Well, Captian's, and some other people's heads would fly. Physically」

While making a gesture of cutting his neck, Elias said so.
Towards the turbulent contents which were contrary to the indifferent manner in which it was said, the new recruit's spine froze.

「That's not at all fine……」

「That's not the case. Eventually, even you'll understand」

Declaring so without any fear or anxiety, Elias lightly clapped the new recruit's back.
The new recruit still couldn't understand how Elias could behave in such a composed manner. But the more abundant a soldier's experience of fighting together with Harold was, the more deeper

their trust became.

When Harold had wanted to go with the subjugation expeditions, at the start, even his parents had disapproved of it. For the parents who doted on their son, it was obvious to stop him.
But when he swung his sword lightly and used magic for a bit in front of their eyes, they readily gave their permission. It was because they were charmed by his excellent talent, and at the same time they anticipated that even the Stokes' fame would rise due to his strength.
Like this, Harold was permitted to accompany the expedition, but that was the first time he had fought with a monster. At the start, he had fought hard battles and had even got injuries which weren't small.

But when Harold was injured he had hid that fact from his parents. It was particularly bad when even though his bone had cracked, he behaved as though nothing had happened, and after leaving for the Sumeragi territory, he had come back only after his wound had healed a few days later.
Although, other than Harold nobody was aware of what it accurately meant, there were lives that were saved.

Originally, subjugation expeditions would be hounded by danger. Even if encountering strong monsters like the Horn Head this time was considered as being rare, receiving sever wounds in battle and dying weren't unusual at all.
But after Harold had started tagging along, people who got severe wounds reduced remarkably and there were no deaths at all.

This was because Harold himself would defeat most of the monsters, but although he would deny it, he was trying to protect the soldiers. The injury where his bone cracked had also happened when he had protected the soldiers who were about to be struck to death by monsters.
It was obvious that this time too, he had judged that some soldiers might get injured if the battle drew any longer.

The soldiers were glad for his consideration but more than that, they were also frustrated.They were protected by the one whom the had to protect. And that too he was still a child.

That's why there were many enthusiastic soldiers who had sworn to become strong enough to protect Harold. It also became motivation for them to train.

(I've acquired enough combat experience against the monsters that come out in this area. If possible, I want the expedition to go more farther, but I've to make sure that nobody gets injured. There's still a huge amount of monsters that I still haven't encountered so I want to collect the data quickly)

Even if it was known that the reason for Harold's behavior was entirely for making it more efficient to earn experience for him to survive, it wouldn't change the fact that the soldiers lives had been saved.
By the way, the reason he had hid the injury from his parents was because he thought that they would prohibit him accompanying the expedition if they came to know about it.

Like that, after piling up encounters with many people due many things, these 3 years had brought about a huge change in Harold. The prime changes were the improvement in his combat ability and his mental growth. Thanks to desperately continuing to fight, he could fearless confront and fight multiple monsters on his own, and could even safely defeat them.
But due to him looking forward to fights a bit too enthusiastically, he had become known as a battle junkie (Berserker), a symbol of fear, among the populace.

And one more thing, this wasn't Harold himself but the change that had occurred in his surroundings. The largest was Tasuku Sumeragi. Due to his efforts, the day when LP farming could come under the sun became close.

Harold, who had returned to the Stokes mansion after finishing the expedition which took about 2 weeks, without even sparing much time to recover from his fatigue, jumped onto the carriage returning to the Sumeragi territory with Tasuku. Regarding this, his parents had conveniently interpreted it as him being passionate about Erika. His stomach became heavy thinking about what kind of reaction those 2 would have when this engagement was annulled, but thinking,'what will happen, will happen', he decided to forget about

it.

「How were the negotiations?」

「They advanced without any issues. With this, we can seriously start working towards propagating it」

Tasuku answered while smiling towards Harold who had a sour look. Advancing successfully meant that as planned, the Stokes house were satisfied with taking the profits which were only there in front of their eyes.
Profits only meant that when LP farming was used the Stokes' farmhouses would be exempt from the contract fee and the utilization fee would be reduced, and also that a part of the tax collected based on the harvested amount would be returned to the Stokes house.

Due to this, the farmhouses in the Stokes territory could use LP farming with less burden. If LP farming which had a fast harvest cycle became popular, they would be in an advantageous position due to exporting it to other territories and countries, and due to the returns comparatively rising up, the populace would be able to pay the tax levied by the Stokes house without any delays.
From Hayden's point of view, the revenue would rise even with him doing nothing, so he might have decided that there would be no need to forcibly get involved in the experimentation of LP farming. It wouldn't be late even if they asked for the rights for joint ownership after Harold and Erika officially got married.

「To think the negotiations would go so easily」

Although it wasn't something that the perpetrator who had devised everything should have said, he involuntarily sighed thinking of what a careless decision his father had made. And towards such a Harold, Tasuku saying, 'That's right', started talking about a new topic.

「There's a message from Itsuki to you」

「Is it another bout?」

「Ahaha, well, habitually without omitting, there is that too, but this time, there's one more thing. 'How about participating in the fighting tournament in Delfit?', was his invitation」

He remembered about Delfit, and also the fighting tournament. Because in the narrative of 『Brave Hearts』, there was an event of winning in Delfit's fighting tournament.

(That was also one way to fight against human rival characters. It's also fine to not seriously try to kill each other……)

This meant that it was a huge chance to obtain new combat experience. It was the best bait to fish the current Harold with.

「……Interesting. I'll participate」

And so, Harold's participation in the fighting tournament was determined.

Chapter 2

Since Harold made the decision without even thinking about it, the rumours circulating in his territory about him being a battle junkie might've not been necessarily wrong. Although it wasn't as dangerous, having his resistance towards fighting drop is a major change. This was the result of him deciding that if it wasn't like this, he'd perish.

"By the way, is your body alright? I heard that you fought against a huge Horn Head on this expedition."

"That again."

Perhaps because Tasuku asked the same question every time they met after an expedition, Harold's voice sounded completely fed up.

But for Tasuku, or rather for the Sumeragi it was the complete opposite. In the past, they had received Harold thinking he had come to visit, when in truth he had been seriously injured. When they had encountered such a situation, although they came to know that he was strong, they were still extremely worried. Moreover, because it was the Harold who had wanted to conclude the matter saying, "It's just a scratch", they were all the more concerned.

Especially Erika, who on the surface did not show any excessive concern and respected Harold's feelings by saying, "Since Harold-sama himself has decided so, it should be alright." Though from that day onwards she seriously began practising her healing magic, her honest emotions were that she couldn't simply sit still without doing anything.

From the time Erika had started practising healing magic, Harold had not gotten injured, and so as of yet her power still hasn't had any use. But still, Erika's devotion towards Harold, which was clearly shown by her diligent practice of healing magic every single day, was real. Although, Harold had not realised it yet.

"Did you really think that I would lose to that small fry whose only characteristic was its large size? Speak only after you think."

“Saying that with Harold-kun’s age itself is surprising.”

“Even your son is like that though.”

Itsuki, who had recently turned 16, could easily defeat a Horn Head on his own. He was the only person who had enough ability to equal Harold in the same generation.

It was the same for Itsuki too, and so they would always compete by holding bouts frequently.

Although Itsuki had just been addressed as Erika’s brother in the game and without even his name appearing in it, he was that strong. Most probably, there were still many formidable people unknown to Harold.

It was huge that at the current stage, he became aware that the overwhelming advantage of having the game’s knowledge might become an obstacle.

When he took this into consideration, Harold thought that it was correct of him to deepen his relationship with the Sumeragi even if the risks increased. Even with the prime unresolved problem, which was his relationship with Erika, there had been almost no progress at all since 3 years ago. He had blatantly kept a distance and had conversed only when necessary while keeping it to the bare minimum.

There had been no fiance-like events at all.

(With this, it would be impossible to raise a flag, right?)

Things were going so favourably that he unintentionally wanted to laugh. Although he could not be careless about the situation of the expanding miasma in the Sumeragi territory, only this had to be resolved by the protagonists, so he could not interfere. But still , with the introduction of the resistance drug and the experimental implementation of LP farming, it was true that the situation had become considerably better.

‘That said, carelessness is one’s greatest enemy. If I think about the future, there are piles of problems and before the start of the game

5 years from now, as much as possible I'll pluck those death flags that will eventually be raised from their roots! ', thought Harold, as he once again strengthened his determination.

* * *

On top of a square platform made of stone, each side of it twenty meters long, two people were exchanging intense sword strikes.

One of them was a boy who was approaching the transition period to his youth, with a height reaching 180 cm and with black hair, which appeared to be somewhat tawny. His usually kind face to which the words pleasant youth would perfectly fit had a grim expression.

Facing the youth was a boy with a height of 160 cm, about a head shorter than the youth, with deep crimson pupils as his defining feature. He moved so intensely that his black hair, which was much darker than the youth's, became dishevelled. Converse to those intense movements he had a sharp glint in his eyes as he dished out sword strikes.

The two who had a close friendship would often cross swords to confirm each other's growth when they occasionally met.

"Haa… haa… yeah, if it's like this, it looks like you'll be alright in the tournament."

Itsuki, who had moved away from Harold's sword range, lowered his own while steadying his breath.

"I don't need your concern."

"Only in strength, though. It's good to know that you'll have no problems in handling a fake sword."

"Don't make light of me. I'm not so weak that this amount of weight would become painful."

"Not that, I was worried about whether you'd be able to hold back or not."

‘Because there’s practically nobody in the same generation who can react to your sword,’ Itsuki thought. If he had to say it, then he felt pity for the opponents who would end up fighting against Harold. Well, it was just needless anxiety about such matters of ability.

“Then, let’s end it here for today. Since the plan is to depart tomorrow morning.”

(Carriage again, huh. It can’t be helped because Delfit is nearby, but I really wanted to board an airship)

Airships were something that appeared in the game, wooden vehicles with appearances similar to ships, yet were able to fly in the air. Its main difference from a ship that sailed on water was that there were wings that sprouted out from both sides of the hull and propellers were attached to the mast and the stern.

It was a vehicle that oozed out impressions of fantasy due to the stress placed on the design, but at the same time, it was unknown as to how it could fly stably with that shape.

Well, since it was powered by ores, called “Crystal”, that monsters dropped when they were defeated, it wasn’t something that could be explained using Science or Physics. By the way, when Crystals were used during compounding, they would be extremely useful in creating and enhancing weapons and armour.

“Ah, right, do you want to change your name for registering in the tournament? Almost everybody who participates in the tournament is a commoner, so I think that your parents might not like you appearing in that kind of place.”

“I don’t know about that, they’d more likely say ‘Good job beating down those inferior species!’ with smiles on their faces.”

Though no matter which reaction they choose to do, they weren’t the appropriate ones they should’ve had.

In that was the case, he should probably change his name and hide his identity, then even if the tournament winner’s name entered his parent’s ears, it wouldn’t become a problem in the future.

“Anything is fine for the alias.”

“Then I’ll think of it as we travel.”

Later on, Harold would stand on the stage with the name “Mr.Lord” that would involuntarily make him doubt Itsuki’s naming sense.

Harold had no idea that such a future was awaiting him, but his suffering would not end at that.

After a few days of travel, they had finally reached Delfit in the evening. The tournament was only a day away, and having finished registering in the lodge, Harold decided it was about time he and Itsuki left for the restaurant to have dinner, but for some reason, Erika was present at their table.

His body unintentionally stiffened.

“Sorry Erika, we’re a bit late.”

Without even minding Harold’s thoughts, Itsuki sat down at the table Erika was at. Harold glared at the both of them demanding an explanation, but even faster than that, Erika asked Itsuki:

“Onii-sama, I thought that only the two of us would be eating together here?”

“Well, you’re not wrong, I invited you saying, ‘How about eating together once in a while?'”

“…so It’s like that.”

Perceiving Itsuki’s plan, Erika grumbled exasperatedly.

In short, Itsuki had invited Erika saying, ‘How about eating together (with Harold-kun) once in a while?’, while intentionally omitting the parenthesized words and making Erika misunderstand.

“If my presence is a nuisance, then should I leave?”

“Stay here.” “Please stay.”

Harold’s and Erika’s voices overlapped.

If Itsuki were to leave now, then Harold would have to eat while facing Erika. Frankly speaking, it would be hell.

It was not that Erika disliked it, but her feelings of not wanting to be a hindrance to Harold when she knew that he was keeping a distance from her, was strong.

Nevertheless, if she were to leave after she had already sat down only by looking at the other person’s face, then it would be too rude. Even if the seat that she was invited to was a trap. Maybe because he had planned it after taking this personality of his little sister’s into consideration, Itsuki’s expression was saying, ‘I’ve done it’.

“…why is she here?”

“Because there are chances of getting injured in the fighting tournament, I thought of making someone who could use healing magic accompany us. However, since it would inconvenience the people of the house, I hesitantly requested Erika to join us.”

It was extremely doubtful whether it was a coincidence or not.

Seeing that Erika, who had similarly been deceived, was not refuting, Harold had doubts whether or not it was true. He couldn’t

help but think that this situation was intentionally created.

“I won’t get injured.”

“There’s a proverb- ‘Well prepared means no worries.’ That’s why I made Erika accompany us.”

“I was told that I wouldn’t make contact with Harold-sama unless it was absolutely necessary, though.”

“I decided that meeting face to face is a necessity. That way, you can move smoothly if something happens, right?”

What Itsuki said wasn’t wrong, so they couldn’t complain about it. So in the end, with the situation being as though they were taken for a ride by Itsuki, the three of them sat around the table. It went without saying that there was no conversation between Erika and Harold. It was so bad that if Itsuki wasn’t there to act as the intermediary, they might have remained silent until the very end. And so the time, which seemed like penance for Harold continued for more than an hour.

By the time they had finished dinner, Harold’s mental exhaustion had reached its peak. After finishing dinner with somewhat unreliable footsteps, Harold returned to his own room and Erika saw that back off with an apologetic feeling.

She had wanted to scold Itsuki for what he did, but maybe because he had sensed that he had left with Harold before so his figure could no longer be seen. In truth, she was delighted about how she could be together with Harold after a long time due to her brother’s plan, but more than that her thoughts of being a burden weighed on her. Originally, Erika did not want to make her existence known during the fighting tournament unless Harold was injured and now that plan was ruined.

While thinking about giving Itsuki a strict warning the next time when they were alone, Erika returned to her room as well. She was staying in the same inn as Harold and Itsuki, but since she had taken into consideration of not wanting to cross into each other, she resided on a different floor.

After opening the door to her room, Juno greeted Erika with her usual nonchalant air.

“Welcome back, Erika-sama～ You seem rather tired～”

“You were watching?”

“Even though it’s like this, I’m still your guard～ Although, since both Itsuki-sama and Harold-sama are stronger than me, I don’t know if there’s any meaning in me being here～”

Being strong or weak was irrelevant to the necessity of a guard, but Erika understood what Juno wanted to say. Since those two would frequently fight each other, the chances to see it wasn’t scarce, but recently she couldn’t understand what was going on because they moved too quickly.

Especially Harold, who would move so fast that people would be doubtful whether he was teleporting or not. However, Itsuki was abnormal too since he could deal with it.

“Come to think of it, have you talked about Colette-sama～?”

Colette Emerel.

The girl who was supposed to have been killed along with her mother for various circumstances was for some reason here in Delfit. If she thought about it while considering the season, then she might have come here spectate the fighting tournament.

“No, I’ve concealed it.”

“As expected, there’s no way you could tell him～”

“Of course, we shouldn’t even know that she’s alive.”

If Harold realised that the Sumeragi knew that Colette and her mother, Clara, were still alive, then they would’ve invited unneeded suspicion from him.

The Emerel mother and daughter were protected by him even to the extent of him being dishonored. Erika absolutely didn’t want to

disgrace those thoughts. She had no intention to step into that secret until Harold himself revealed it one day.

Still, she couldn't simply stay quiet. That's why Erika said that if they were to meet again, she wished to become friends.

Erika felt it after she actually saw Colette herself. That couldn't she too become a person who could support Harold? Colette should have known about Harold's strength and kindness because she had been saved by it, and was still being protected by it.

If they were to meet again, then that might be the time when Harold would speak about the secret. Erika thought that at that time she would once again want to become friends with Colette and that they would become good friends for sure.

"I'm going to retire for the night, so you can return to your room now, Juno."

"Understood～ Good night, Erika-sama"

"Good night."

After Juno left the room, Erika changed into her sleep-wear, and almost immediately after she had turned off the lights, she dived into the bed. It was different from her usual futon, it gave off an unfamiliar springy sensation.

Compared to the one in the Stokes mansion, it wasn't very comfortable to sleep on.

Since she couldn't fall asleep, the things that she was thinking about before started to run through her head yet again.

If she became friends with Colette once they met again, then at that time Colette might get drawn towards Harold.

Although they were engaged, but it was only in name. She knew that Harold was planning to cancel it, and if that happened, no-*when* that happened, then Colette might become her rival in love.

Normally, one would feel jealous, but strangely, Erika's heart was

calm and it wasn't because she thought that she had the advantage in love.

'Colette will become my rival… and I'm fine with that', was how she thought. In these past few years, Erika had become aware of how she was yearning for Harold. If she were to hope for it, then she wanted her first love to be fulfilled.

But for Erika, those feelings of love were not the most important. What she wished for more than anything else was for Harold's happiness. That's why she wanted for Harold to be with the person he himself would choose. It didn't matter even if that person wasn't her.

If her feelings were rejected, then she would cry for sure. Her love towards Harold was real.

Still, if Harold were to marry Colette or someone else, she wanted to bless them from the bottom of her heart with a bright smile. These were Erika's true feelings as well.

It's not as though there weren't any other ways to support Harold other than becoming his partner.

(That's why I'm looking forward to our reunion)

While being bathed in the moonlight from the window, she gently smiled while thinking of her future friend.

The brilliantly shining moonlight reminded her of Colette's vibrant blond hair. While thinking that, Erika closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 3

「Fuwa ~a, why do we have do something like patrolling at a time like this?」

Wearing an armor which was carved with the emblem that represented the Saint King's chivalric order, black wings similar to obsidian and a silver sword, a man in the latter half of his twenties muttered listlessly while yawning hugely.
His subordinate, who was following behind him, chided him seeing as he clearly had no enthusiasm at all.

「Since it is work, please don't complain, Squad leader. Even I don't want to patrol so early in the morning」

The clock's needle was currently pointing at a bit past 5 A.M.
Moreover, the patrol had started together with sunrise, at 4 in the morning.
The reason was because of the already open and bustling shops.
Especially flourishing were shops that served alcohol.

Once in a year, during the 3 days when the fighting tournament was held, almost all the fishermen would take a break from work, and they would drink alcohol from morning to get excited for the tournament and would let the merry-making unfold.
The town would overflow with drunk people, so there were repeated quarrels and the public order would get a little bad. The patrol would act as both a deterrence force and also to deal with cases like those.

「I think that you can't be too merry just because there's a festival」

「Although you're saying that, why are you trying to go drink alcohol?」

The subordinate grabbed the shoulder of his superior, Squad leader Cody, who was trying to enter a bar as though it was very natural.
Him being this informal in his speech and attitude towards his superior was solely because of Cody's personality. It wasn't that he

didn't give Cody any respect.

「Ale is calling me」

「Don't suddenly say idiotic things with a serious face」

Cody's subordinate brought him back to the patrolling course as though he was dragging him.
Without being able to do anything, Cody just saw off the bar which was becoming distant. It wasn't clear as to whose position was higher.

「Haa……so, not being able to do anything other than look at the surrounding people drink alcohol will continue for another 3 days, huh……」

「Even though you say that, Squad leader, aren't you weak against alcohol?」

'Moreover, it's irritating that you get entangled in a quarrel after you drink', towards the subordinate who added such a complaint, Cody replied.

「It's not that I like drinking alcohol. I like getting drunk」

For Cody, drinking ale was a means and not the objective. He declared that anything was fine as long as he got inebriated. Accompanying Cody to drink some cheap, unappetizing alcohol, and finally getting dragged into a quarrel, for him, it was unbearable.

While the 2 of them were engaged in such a worthless dialog, from the alley in front of them, they suddenly heard a sound as though glass was shattering. Consequently, they also heard a woman's shriek and a loud noise.
They exchanged glances, and then, both of them sighed deeply.

「Looks like it's time for work」

「Good grief…….Can't they drink in a more enjoyable manner」

「That's not something that Squad leader can say」

「Shut up. Well, Robin-kun, let's go control the situation with that frightening face of yours that makes everybody scared without any exceptions」

While speaking, they ran towards the direction of the sound. Turning around the corner of the alley, they pushed through the crowd of people to confirm what was happening. He ignored Robin aka Robinson who was muttering,'Can't you change the way you say it……', behind him.

「Alright, please excuse me」

「Haah? Don't push through-!?」

The robust man who lived on the seas, turned around to complain towards Cody, who was forcing his way through, and after looking behind him he saw Robinson's face and lost his voice.
A 190 cm tall figure with a muscular physique, with dark skin more tanned than fishermen's. Those dark grey sanpaku[1] eyes coupled with them being slanted, his fiendish face looked as though he was intimidating the other party.
He was much more scary than those monsters around here.

Robinson's temperament was gentle. He was the so-called type of person who was at a disadvantage due to his appearance.
But the amount of times it was used as an advantage when he was working as a knight wasn't scarce. If the enemy was weak-willed, they would become timid as soon as they were glared at, and in situations like these, his path would naturally open up.
Even this time, the effect was instantaneous. It was to the extent that as soon as they noticed Robinson's presence, the crowd parted.

「Truly, it's so smooth when Robin-kun is here」

「I'll accept that as praise……」

Like this, after Cody and Robinson struggled and arrived at the center of the crowd, there was a single boy and an adult man, and also a person who was wriggling while flapping his legs while his torso was thrust into a big water jug in front of a store.
Even while Cody and Robinson still couldn't grasp what was

happening, the boy pulled out the man who was stuck in the water jug. While looking down on the soaked man, who was and coughing and choking while on all fours, the boy muttered sarcastically.

「How's it? Have you sobered up a little?」

The man who was frantically inhaling air had no leeway to answer. Instead, the other man flared up at the boy.

「You bastard, what the hell are you doing!」

「Can't you tell just by looking? It seems as though even you have no recollection of what you did, so how about you too pour cold water on yourself like this bastard? Well, if you weren't sane from before itself, then it would have no meaning though」

「Spouting out shit as you please……..! I won't show mercy even if you're a kid!」

Maybe because he was too drunk, the man approached the boy in a run while brandishing his right arm, wanting to hit the boy.
Even though he knew he couldn't make it in time, Cody ran after the man to stop him. And he saw those eyes.
The boy's penetratingly cold pupils.

Even with a man who wanted to hurt him right in front of his eyes, let alone showing hostility, the boy didn't even seem to be interested in him. And not only that, he even captured Cody, who was rapidly approaching from behind the man, in his vision.
In this situation, he had a calmness and a broadness of vision unthinkable of a child.

His eyes met with the boy's. In that instant, those emotionless eyes were dyed by a look of surprise, and then by vigilance.
But that too was only momentary. The boy slipped past the man's large swing and drove his elbow into the man's solar plexus.

That was more than enough to make the man kneel. The boy, who appeared from the other side of the man who had crumbled down, still had his sight turned towards Cody, severely glaring at him, even while being showered in the surrounding crowd's applause.

Being in the middle of this series of events, Cody hit upon something.

(Don't tell me, he perceived my strength? Just by the intersection of our sight that didn't even fully last for even an instant?)

The unmotivated attitude, dislike towards fetters of obligation and hiding of true strength had affected Cody and had made him be content with the status of having the official post of Squad leader, but his fighting prowess was such that even in the chivalric order, it would be much faster if one counted from the top to reach him. It was to the that extent that he could fight on par with the person who would most likely become the next Captain of the Saint King's chivalric order, Vincent Van Westerfort.
If it was that the boy became surprised at his strength and went on guard looking out for his intervention, then Cody could understand the boy's reaction.

(Even more than his strength being able to defeat a large man in one blow, the surprising matter is his observant eyes)

To be able to accurately see through whether the opponent's strength was higher or lower than oneself's just by looking, the person himself should have a certain degree of ability. It seemed as though the boy was considerably strong.
Wanting to relax the boy's vigilance, who was still observing him very closely, Cody raised both his hands and plastered a tired smile on his face.

「Well, that was splendidly skillful. Onii-san was surprised」

That figure of him laughing,'Ha ha ha', was extraordinarily shady. But maybe because the boy decided that he didn't want to mix up matters with Cody, he slackened his vigilance. Thinking that it would be fine to ask him about the situation if it was like this, Cody continued to speak.

「I'm sorry, but could you please tell me what exactly happened? Even we just came running now, so we still haven't grasped the situation」

「…….It was just that these drunkards were quarreling. And during that time, one of them was thrust towards me so I just dealt with him」

「I see. That was quite the artistic way of dealing with it. Joking aside」

Remembering the legs sprouting out from the water jug, his laughter was welling up. Later on, it might become a funny story when he was drinking. The boy tried to leave since there was nothing else left to speak.

「Ah, wait, wait! You aren't injured, are you? Even if it's a scratch, if germs enter it'll be terrible」

「I just dealt with guys who couldn't even help me warm-up. There's no problem」

「Really? Don't take it lightly. If you just move your body for a bit, then any pain might……」

「Annoying. If you want to know about what happened, ask the rubbernecks. Or else, do you want to waste my time by questioning me?」

「Ah, you found out?」

His true feelings was that about 20% was for grasping the situation. The rest of it was because he was curious about the boy's identity, he wanted to drag the conversation but it ended futilely. Glancing at Cody who had easily confessed, the boy left.

「Squad leader, what to do with those people?」

「Ah, right, let's see. For now, we'll wait for them to recover, and in the meantime……」

While firing orders to Robinson, Cody was thinking about the black-haired boy. That discernment and the way he carried himself, and also that unflinching grit even with a person as strong as Cody in front of him, all these were abilities that couldn't be learnt if he hadn't experienced real combat. As he saw it, the boy was about 12

to 13 years old, but it was unknown as to where he had piled up such experiences.

(There are many points that I'm curious about, but to start with, let's pay attention to the fighting tournament. It seems as though I'll be able to see something interesting)

From his words that said they weren't even able to warm him up, the probability of him participating in today's fighting tournament was high. When he thought of how the fight for the under-13 division was being held on the 1st day, the boy's age too seemed to be dead on.
To the work that was boring, a fragment of enjoyment came rolling in. While thinking of remembering the boy's name, Cody just realized that he had forgotten to ask for the boy's name.

◇

(I panicked! I seriously panicked! Why is Cody here!?)

As though running away from the crowd of people, or rather after actually running away, Harold entered an empty alley and held his head.
The reason was because of the one he had just now encountered, Cody. It was obvious since Harold knew his name, but as expected he too was a character who appeared in the game.

He was the core person of the mercenary group 『Furiel』, which was made up of wanderers……but he would occasionally appear in front of the hero party and from a common front, and at times would use them in a good way- he was that kind of incomprehensible character. Well, basically he was a good person who came out in some spots and had the role of rescuing the party.
Harold already knew about the setting of Cody being a former member of the Saint King's chivalric order, so he wasn't surprised seeing him wear that armor, but he hadn't even thought that he would run into Cody in this place.

Because of the tumult of the city that started stirring at sunrise, Harold had opened his eyes when the time was bit past 4 in the morning.

While thinking about the boisterous and somewhat restless air, he was reminded of the college festival in his university years, and as though it was inviting him his legs turned towards the city.

30 minutes after he thought of doing some warm-up while also exploring Delfit, a loud shout reached Harold's ears when he was wandering in the market street without any aim. When he turned his eyes towards the origin of the voice, there were 2 men who were grasping each other's collars and quarreling. Due to their scuffle, a wooden table was overturned and the plates and glasses on top of it fell down and shattered with a piercing noise.
As he thought of how they were overflowing with vigor so early in the morning, and when was about to pass them since he wasn't meddlesome enough to stop them, that happened.

The man who was thrust away came falling in Harold's direction. It wasn't a big deal. It would have been fine to quickly avoid him and walk away. When he was about to do so, he realized that there was a small girl behind him. If Harold were to dodge, the girl might be squashed by the man.

And from there, his body moved before he could think. Harold swept the legs of the man, who was unbalanced and was falling down towards him, while at the same time he gripped the man's right wrist and shoved him inside the uncovered water jug. The man who was floating in midair had no means to struggle.
After that, it became something like Harold fighting the other man and paying him back after agitating him with sarcastic words. At this point, Harold had a defiant mental state thinking,'I don't care anymore'.
He had already given up being hateful at this mouth whenever it spit out reckless remarks since it would just make him tired.

When Harold was thinking of handling it as fast as possible, he noticed the suddenly incoming Cody and his mind went into chaos. Due to that, he lost his composure and unintentionally erred in holding back as he used his elbow.

(Sorry, I went too far, uncle who's name I don't know)

Remembering the appearance of the man who had fainted, Harold

apologized in his heart, and after suddenly calming down, he realized that there had been no need to run away from Cody.
In the first place, Harold and Cody's relationship in the game hadn't been described. By the time the game started, Harold had been a member of the chivalric order, and Cody had already made Furiel. Although there might have been some period when they had both been members, it would have been very short.

(I mean, wouldn't it have become more easier later if he had remembered my face?)

Since there were times when Cody would accompany the hero party, if Harold had some connection to him, Cody could become a source for Harold to learn about the party's internal affairs. If he thought about it, then his previous actions might have been too hasty.
While pondering about how to somehow build a friendly relationship with Cody the next time they met, Harold returned to the inn to have breakfast.
When he arrived in front of the inn, he met Itsuki who had just come out.

「Good morning, Harold-kun. Where had you gone?」

「Previewing the venue」

It was true that along with taking a stroll, he had taken a glance at the venue. Looking at the unexpectedly big stage, honestly he was a bit nervous.

「It seems like you have enough motivation. I have something that I want to give you」

「…….What is this?」

Itsuki handed him something that was wrapped in paper. While feeling suspicious, he peeled the wrapping off. The thing that was there was a mask that covered from above the nose, like the one used in balls.

「Since you're participating while changing your name, I thought

how about even hiding your real face too」

「Like hell I'd want this!」

That retort came from his very soul. They might have been the most powerfully said words from the time he had possessed this body. Somehow recently Itsuki's character had become more and more incomprehensible. When they had first met, Harold had thought that he was a person with serious sister complex, but actually, he had a weird playfulness which could be considered as quite similar to Erika in the game.
But when he prepared for such an item with a serious face, Harold couldn't help but doubt whether he was playful or a natural airhead. Was he really the same person who had outwitted Erika and Harold last night?

Harold, who was dejected with the mask given as a present, would immediately come to know that he had been registered in the tournament with an extremely dubious name like 『Mr.Lord』, and would once again quarrel with Itsuki just before the tournament. As a result, his nervousness was dispersed with a pointless tiredness replacing it, and he stood on the stage for his first match.

The stage at the venue was surrounded with a huge crowd with their enthusiastic gazes and cheers directed towards the participants. The pressure felt as though it could physically push. If one took even a step out of the room where the under-13 division's participants were present, they would unsparingly be bathed in that pressure.

「And facing off, with his real name unknown, is Mr.Lord-kun!」

When his registered name was called, Harold climbed up the stage with heavy footsteps. Although this digressed, the only one who had used an alias from among all the participants was just Harold, so he stood out even more. Even if he didn't want his background to be known, if he gathered attention due to it, then wouldn't it have had an adverse affect.

While thinking about such things, Harold pushed down his embarrassment, and as though expelling all his emotions, his face

became completely expressionless. Although that appearance seemed as though he was concentrating on the match, if one looked at the young boy from up close, they would feel as though they were looking at some fearful existence.

And when the match was about to start, Harold saw her. The blond hair that was shining due to the sunlight was longer than what he remembered, with it being tied in a ponytail now, was the girl he had saved 3 years ago. Although she still had childish features, there were vestiges of features that would be there 5 years later of which only Harold knew, Colette Emerel was there in the spectator seats.
Colette too looked at Harold with her chestnut colored eyes. As though to run away from that gaze, Harold averted his eyes.

She completely knew. When he saw how Colette had widened her eyes due to surprise, Harold was convinced of it. It was the worst timing possible for a reunion since Erika was here. If there was a God, he wanted to curse at his nastiness.

(Ah, if I knew that it would be like this, it would have been better to have worn that mask given by Itsuki…….. It might have become unexpectedly popular. Isn't it the strongest item since it can hide one's identity while also get laughs?)

Harold, who had fallen into a crisis, for now, attempted to escape reality.

TL-
1.Sanpaku gan (三白眼) or Sanpaku (三白) is a Japanese term meaning "three whites", and refers to eyes in which the white space above or below the iris is visible.

Chapter 4

While being jostled by the heated-up crowd, Cody forcibly pushed his way through. He apologised to the surrounding crowd and with light movements, quickly arrived at the front row of the spectator seats.

“Oh, it seems like I somehow made it in time. It was worth it to leave the work to my subordinates.”

Stroking the stubble on his chin, Cody muttered after he found the black-haired boy standing on the stage. Cody’s squad had been ordered to patrol all around the city yet he had pushed that work onto his three subordinates, including Robinson while sneaking out to observe the fighting tournament. Right about now, his subordinates would be working while resentfully complaining about him. He’d receive scoldings after they met later, but for now, he forgot about that and gave preference to satisfying his curiosity.

Sitting in a seat with a good view, he watched a few matches that weren’t very interesting and finally, the boy whom he had been waiting for appeared on the stage. His outfit seemed like it was tailor-made for him with the material being good quality leather and even the gauntlet equipped on his left arm, from its colour, it seemed to be made from materials different from the general bronze ones.

(That’s superior to the ones used by the low-class knights (us). Is he a noble from somewhere?)

Even the name that was called was Mr.Lord, which was obviously an alias. From his outfit, the probability of him being a common citizen was low. In that case, it would be quite hard to lure him into the Chivalric Order. Though actually recruiting him would depend on his strength,Cody had come here to ascertain that.

In other words, this would work out as a splendid pretence of him scouting out a talent who could carry the chivalric order in the future. By no means was he slacking off. He had also prepared to argue with such sophistry when the time came. With this, he could

concentrate on the boy's match without any anxiety.

"Now let's see what you've… got?"

Before Cody could even finish his sentence, the match was over. Immediately after the 'Start!' call, Lord closed the distance, flicked away his opponent's sword and thrust his own, all in a single step.

The match didn't even take three seconds, being concluded at lightning speed. It was understandable that the opponent boy's eyes had become dots.

Yet that sharp gaze filled with killing intent might've induced much more fear than the fake sword thrust in front of the boy. Swallowed by the murderous aura of Lord, the opponent declared his surrender with a quavering voice.

Due to the match ending instantaneously, even the excited crowd didn't know what had happened and was making a stir. Yet without even minding the crowd's bewilderment, Lord swiftly left the stage.

"…are you serious? Isn't this actually a real outstanding talent?"

The strength of the participants in this sort of tournament would naturally vary. Even Lord's current opponent was considerably strong, but it was only to the degree of when speaking within that given age group. In other words, it was not the part about him winning that needed to be noted, it was his speed. Most probably, the other boy had noticed that *something* had happened and before he even realised it, he had lost. If he only compared speed, then Lord would completely outclass his current subordinates.

Even while being surrounded by thousands of spectators, without faltering in the slightest, he had overwhelmed his opponent in an instant without any excessive movements. Although he was still immature with regards to the mind, skill and body, being able to exhibit that physical ability under that much pressure was extraordinary.

With this much talent, it would be a waste to keep it hidden. Thinking like that may be due to the ego developed from belonging

to the Chivalric Order, but as far as Cody was concerned, they would lose nothing by increasing their number of talented individuals. Even if he called it scouting, the right to decide whether one would join or not was left to the individuals themselves, but Cody didn't have such an admirable personality to hold back due to something like that.

(It would be good to call dibs on him now but…)

From the previous match, Cody perceived a certain indication from Lord. It was as though he was rushing the match, a negligible but sure impatience was present.

It was that Lord who had seen through Cody's strength without even an instant passing when their gazes crossed this morning. There was no way that Lord couldn't have perceived the difference in strength between himself and his opponent. Yet that wasn't a reason to rush for the win, though that might have just simply been Cody's misunderstanding.

But if that wasn't the case, then why was he so impatient? This doubt remained within Cody's head as the tournament went on.

* * *

From the moment he noticed Colette, Harold's actions were extremely fast. With the call for the start of the match, he broke into a quick attack, made his opponent surrender instantly and left the stage.

He hurriedly returned to the tournament participants' room and while frantically moving his eyes, he started searching for a certain boy.

Since Colette was here, there was a high probability of *him* being here as well. The protagonist of "Brave Hearts", Ryner.

The problem was whether he was a spectator like Colette or a participant in the tournament. The worst case scenario would be him facing off against Ryner in a match.

Unfortunately, Harold's prayer of 'Please be in the spectator seats',

vanished into thin air. The embodiment of naturally high spirits and liveliness, his spiky hair entered Harold's vision. Its colour was just as he remembered, a burning red.

When the name 'Ryner Griffith' was called, he dashed towards the stage, burning with fighting spirit. Harold's head hung down when he confirmed that figure. With this, it became definite that Ryner was participating in the tournament.

(Seriously…? Should I give up before I face him?)

This development shouldn't have been there in the game. In the game, when he reaches Delfit, there was a scene where Ryner would be surprised looking at a huge ship. 'So it was the first time he had come to Delfit', such words were said. He completely did not understand how that would lead to him participating in the fighting tournament.

In any case, he would let sleeping dogs lie. While he was thinking of withdrawing from the tournament by giving some vague reason, he suddenly realised that he was doing the same thing that he had done this morning. Without even thinking, just because they were characters that appeared in the game, he was reflexively trying to avoid them.

If he thought back to it, the reason Ryner was hostile towards Harold was mainly because of Clara's death and Harold's conduct within the story. And Harold had already cleared Clara's matter.

Although his speech was like that, he planned to prove himself through his actions rather than his words in the future. This meant that there'd be no reason for Ryner to hate him. Instead, it'd be a good plan to get along with him. Although he had no intention to be included in the hero party that always fought on the front lines, it was possible to give them advice on increasing their war potential through his knowledge of the game. If they became hostile, there was no way they would listen to him.

When he thought until there, his head had also cooled down a lot. In the first place, even if Erika and Colette met, it would be their first time seeing each other. As long as Harold was not present

when they met, there was no way his past actions would be discovered.

Since Erika would not get close to Harold on her own, it would be a good chance to indirectly inquire about Colette and Ryner's relationship through this tournament.

While confirming Ryner's current strength, Harold could get acquainted with him, building a friendly relationship he could use in the future. There was no need to simply stand and watch this chance slip away from right under his nose. As he established his objective, Harold shifted his awareness towards the match. When he turned towards the stage, it was just when Ryner had won the match, happily pumping his fists[1].

Although it was hypothetical, he was still the Hero that would save the world in the future. 'If talking with regards to the game, even if he was level 1, he wouldn't lose at a place like this', was what Harold wanted to think. With that said, he should take this chance to congratulate him for his win, it'd be a good conversation starter.

(What should I say? Congratulations? …no, that'd just become 'Well, aren't you impulsive?' What heck is that? That's so arrogant. Uh… to make it harmless and inoffensive I need to say…)

While he thought of such things, Ryner had already walked past him. Wanting to stop him, Harold spontaneously said:

"Hey you, Red-hair."

As a result, he made a mistake in choosing his words. Together with his posture, where he had folded his arms while leaning his back on the wall, his words came off as being extraordinarily haughty. But the words had already left his mouth, there was no way he could take them back. At the words 'Red hair', Ryner's feet stopped.

"Ah, it's you!"

The moment Ryner became aware of Harold, he suddenly drew closer. Harold thought that he might've gotten angry, but there was no anger in those eyes, instead they had a flame blazing within

them.

“Say, aren’t you that incredibly fast guy? I was watching, but I couldn’t understand it at all! How did you do that?! Can I also do that?!”

That manner of his contained so much force that it made even Harold, who had called him, want to back away. Even in the game, he was a character who had retained his childishness, but when he was actually a kid, that characteristic was all the more apparent.

“Even if it’s just a trick, please teach me! If that’s not possible, I’d be satisfied knowing what kind of training you do regularly! I carry weights when I go on runs, but there’s no way I could move as fast you did!”

“To start with, close that needlessly functioning mouth.”

“Ah, sorry. Come to think, I still haven’t introduced myself. I’m Ryner!”

Ryner cheerfully extended his right hand.

After hesitating for a moment, Harold shook that hand.

“…Harold. Call me however you want.”

“Okay! Nice to meet you, Harold!”

Ryner turned a worry-free grin towards Harold. For him, they were

already friends. That's just how Ryner was. Even for Harold, that was a likeable point. Contacting this pure boy completely due to ulterior motives hurt Harold's conscience a bit, but he pushed that thought aside.

"I saw your fighting style, truth be told it was a bit impulsive, but it was much better than the rest of this riffraff."

"Hee, thanks!"

No matter what, one could only think that he was trying to agitate the other participants. Obviously, grim glares flew towards them from the surroundings, but without noticing them, Ryner became shy. It seemed as though the fact that he was an idiot who couldn't understand sarcasm hadn't changed. For Harold, where the forcibly used abusive language was a cause of constant annoyance, he was considerably grateful for that reaction.

"But I have no duty to teach you anything. If you want to know, then fight against me and try to steal it. Though that's only if you're able to keep winning your matches."

"I'll do it! Harold too, make sure not to lose before you fight against me, alright?"

"Who do you think you're speaking to? The only thing you'll learn is that the difference in strength between us like the heavens and earth."

"I'm looking forward to it! Well, later! Next time, let's meet at the match!"

Ryner's friendly smile had disappeared, an aggressive smirk growing in its place, while Harold grinned haughtily in return. The two of them both determined and fearless. For now, this was their preliminary encounter.

From afar, the other participants were glowering at the two. Since the both of them spoke as though nobody else mattered other than each other, it couldn't be helped that they thought those two were provoking them.

Unexpectedly, he had raised the hurdle for Ryner, but if he was the hero, then this shouldn't be a problem.

"Only then will this fight be worth it."

Harold mumbled while looking at his right hand, which had been grasped strongly.

TN:

1. It was originally written as Guts-pose, a pose made by a the famous boxer Guts Ishimatsu, where he would pump his fists up and down in the air after a win.

Translated by Madao. Re-edited by KuroInfinity.

Chapter 5

Those emotions that hinted at his true feelings, for them to be expressed as words was a difficult feeling. The most appropriate might be the feeling of being deeply moved.
Finally, he had already come to the point where he met with the hero of 『Brave Hearts』, Ryner. The chance meeting that should have happened 5 years in the future according to the game, had already been accomplished.
Although it was completely outside his expectations, being able to build a friendly relationship with Ryner had proved that his actions up until now hadn't been wrong.

Involuntarily, the corners of his mouth rose up. It looked like an extremely evil smile. The participants who personally saw it were attacked by chills, and all of them simultaneously retreated. Harold, whose conscious had completely shifted onto Ryner, didn't notice the situation around him.

How can I gain his trust? How high is his strength currently? Does he have a close relationship with Colette like in the game?- Harold only had these thoughts inside his head right now.

As a matter of fact, soon after Harold came to know that this was the world of 『Brave Hearts』, while establishing the objective of evading his own death flags, only once he had thought that there might not be any need for him to personally take any action.
Bluntly speaking, this world was something that was produced. It was an interweaving of characters and fate determined by the producers, a story with its conclusion already determined.

There will always be a protagonist in a story. And for a protagonist, something called protagonist correction[1] always exists.

That, which could also be called as the will of the author, was a tremendous power that could make the surrounding circumstances, the flow of the environment, the world itself an ally of the protagonist. Naturally, inside the game, even Ryner had been saved by it. If that wasn't the case, no matter how outstanding they were, there was no way the world could be saved by some 10 odd people.

But contrarily, as long as Ryner was the protagonist, people would, the world would ally with him. This world too should have surely been made in that manner.
That's why, he doubted the necessity of a small existence like Harold Stokes trying out to help. Without doing anything unnecessary, quickly getting out of the front stage of the story, it would be be much better and would also be as far away as possible from danger if he became some nameless Villager A.
Like that itself, wouldn't it be fine to just play dumb in some corner of the world like the minor role he was and wait for the story to welcome the happy ending.

If he thought back to it now, that might have been him shrinking back due to his future, wanting to throw away his duties and escaping. But still, the reason he wasn't invited by that easy way out was because of the fact that he had saved Clara.
Although it was with Harold's assistance, she was able to escape her death which should have already been determined.
In short, even if this was a world that resembled the game 『Brave Hearts』, there was no correction power that existed like in the story.

If this hypothesis was correct, then even if Harold ran away, there might not be any villain who would appear instead of him. That would make the story collapse. It might also serve as a negative effect on the protagonist's growth. The protagonist who couldn't grow as much as in the game couldn't save the world- to also avoid this kind of situation, Harold continued to be involved in the story.

(…….But if you think about it in the other way, it would also be possible to strengthen Ryner)

Although Harold had just focused on the negative aspects and hadn't even thought about it until they actually met, by making him accumulate more experience than in the game and by teaching him how to efficiently fight against enemies, Ryner could become stronger than in the game.

Hiding this secret motive, Harold was waiting for their confrontation. Until the fight against Ryner, all the other participants he fought with, were defeated in a single move without

any exceptions.
And the battle against Ryner was, as though someone had planned for it, was on the stage for the finals. Both their victories were overwhelming. Almost none of their opponents could exchange blows with them. And when the 2 of them stood against each other on the stage, the spectators' excitement had reached the peak.

「Like I promised, I've come till here」

「Naturally. If it isn't just all talk, then prove that strength to me」

「Bring it on!」

Making a strong face filled with competitive spirit, without being timid, Ryner declared. His thoughts that he was absolutely going to win were clearly floating up. Maybe he couldn't hold back those feelings. As soon as the match started, Ryner attacked.

It was a horizontal sweep, as though wanting to ward off the opponent. Immediately after Harold avoided that by moving backwards, Ryner, who had closed the distance, pursued attacking. From the right, from the left, from above, from below, and sometimes, directly from the front. Those uninterrupted sword strikes that were unleashed, each and every single one of them, were calmly knocked away by Harold.

Speed, power and technique. Certainly, compared to the opponents Harold had fought against until now, Ryner outclassed every single one of them in all these areas. Harold could understand how he could safely come up to the finals.
But that was it. He didn't feel any menace from Ryner's strength.

(Oioi……..seriously, is that all?)

As far as Harold was concerned, bluntly speaking, there wasn't much difference compared to the other participants. At the current point of time, if Ryner's strength was expressed in game values, it would be level 1, and if one took his age into consideration, then he might be even lower. If that point was taken as the basis, then it would be inevitable to think that Harold was aiming too high, but if it was like this, then Harold couldn't help but doubt whether he

could become a hero who could truly save the world.
Personally seeing Ryner's strength, the thing Harold felt was neither anger nor disappointment. It was an anxiety that seemed to weigh down heavily upon him.

◇

That was, for Ryner, a shocking spectacle. The tournament he had participated in, while in high spirits. The boy who had participated before him, with a speed that could only be seen as though he had disappeared, had finished his match before anybody could even blink.

Harold. That was how the boy, who was so fast that even following him with the eyes would be difficult, named himself. Moreover, Harold who had that much strength, had acknowledged his own strength. For Ryner who had put great effort to become strong, to gain strength for protecting the people important to him, those words made him happy. But at the same time, seeing that a boy, whose age wasn't that much different than his own was so strong, he also felt frustrated.

That's why, he was really serious. Like how he was against his parents, who repelled him every time he challenged them, or even more seriously putting his all his feelings, Ryner confronted Harold. As though he wanted to collide with Harold with everything he had. And yet, Ryner's sword didn't reach Harold.

(Not even a single strike is hitting him, why!?)

More than 50 sword strikes. Almost all of them were repelled by Harold's sword, and those that weren't, were easily evaded by him by simply turning his body.
Although it was a thin and lightweight longsword, he was freely using it with only one hand, and was effortlessly dealing with Ryner's strikes.

And moreover, Harold still hadn't used that extremely high speed of his to attack in this match. He was continuing to let Ryner attack as he pleased while not moving his legs at all.
As though he was completely on the defensive. Because it was

different from his usual flashy way of fighting, the spectators were cheering him on by saying,'Fight properly'.
But for Ryner who was crossing swords with him, every time they he struck with his sword, he was shown the clear difference in their strength. It was close to the despair felt when a staunch fort, furnished with tall, thick ramparts, was invaded with just a single swing of a sword.

The moment a small crack was produced in Ryner's heart, his sword dulled by a little bit, and seeing that, Harold backed away.
And he threw these words at Ryner's strength.

「What a disappointment. You're not even worth considering」

「What!?」

「Isn't that the truth? You're attacks aren't even grazing me. It's futile no matter how many times you repeat it」

「You haven't even attacked yet!」

「You moron. Something like that, I can do it whenever I want」

Harold put those words into action. Simultaneously as Ryner realized that Harold had disappeared from his vision, the sword held by both his hands was cut down.
The blade was split right at the middle, and the upper half of the blade slid on top of the stone floor. There was only the less than one half of the length of the thing that had been a sword, left in his hands.

All the weapons used in the fighting tournament were fake swords that had their edges dulled. That said, to bisect it so cleanly, he couldn't even imagine just how much skill was required.
And yet, the most surprising thing was still that speed. Looking at it from outside and actually confronting it was completely different. Before Ryner could really see anything at all, he had already closed the gap.

「Not being able to even react to something of this level, I can't help but feel shocked」

「Shit…….」

He lost, without any suspense. He was shown a difference that was greater than one between an adult and a child. It was the first time since he had been born that he had lost to a person in the same generation in sword strength. He hadn't even thought that it would be so frustrating.

As though averting his eyes from Harold, who seemed like too distant an existence, Ryner turned his face downwards.

‘Now, it’ll be over after the referee declares my defeat’, thought Ryner, but no matter how much time passed, the referee didn’t raise his voice. What was displayed in front of Ryner’s eyes, when he raised his face up since he was thinking that it was strange, was Harold’s figure who had thrust the fake sword in front of the referee.

「…….Eh?」

Looking at that scene which exceeded his understanding, that frustration and sense of defeat was instantly blown away, and he was left completely dumbfounded.
For some reason, Harold was threatening the referee.

「Oi, you bastard, this guy still hasn’t admitted that he has been defeated, so what are you thinking wanting to end the match?」

「No, well, his weapon is broken and since he can’t fight anymore…….」

「Then won’t it be fine for him to use another one」

「Eeh…..?」

At those words, this time, both Ryner and the referee became perplexed. Ignoring those 2, Harold ripped away a sword from one the other participants below the stage.
No matter how anybody saw it, this match was Harold’s win. Even Ryner, though hadn’t said it from his own mouth, had already acknowledged his defeat.

「Ryner」

「Wh, what?」

Holding a fake sword that had been conveniently taken away, Harold came back in front of Ryner. And then, Harold threw it carelessly at his feet, while he was being vigilant.

「Pick it up if you still have the will to fight」

「……」

Ryner was silently gazing at the thrown sword. If it were the usual him, without any hesitation, he might have picked it up and asked for a rematch. The reason he was hesitating like this now was because Harold was too strong. If there was such a formidable opponent in the same generation, there was no way he could be a match for him. He was afraid of thinking like that, of acknowledging that.

It was close to instinct to think of protecting one's self-respect, pride. Much less, when Ryner had never lost to anybody except his parents. And now, after he had thoroughly lost to Harold, if he were to fight anymore, then would only add to the shame of losing. His heart might break.
'That's why, let's stop', he thought.

「For what reason do you seek strength?」

That decision was halted by Harold's question.

「For what, reason……」

Why had he thought of becoming strong.
Was it because it was his dream to become the Captain of a chivalric order? Was it because he wanted to win against his mother or father some day? Certainly, those were also true. They were his dream from before, and a nearby target. But he felt that those weren't the correct reasons.

How had he arrived at wanting to fulfill that dream, and that target? Why had he admired the position of the Captain of a chivalric order?

(If I become strong, then I can be a knight. Since if I become a knight, then I can protect various people……..)

Protect. It was a very vague, and yet a very simple desire. But, that was right. Ryner's craving for strength, its origin was laughably simple.

When he had been younger than now, a friend of his had been bullied by a kid who was older than them in the village. The

difference of 1 or 2 years was extremely huge for children. To surpass that gap, Ryner sought strength. To protect his friend, to defeat an opponent who was bigger and stronger than himself. The justice that lived inside him, to put that into practice, it wasn't possible if he weren't strong. He wanted strength to protect the things important to him.

「……..I have things that I have to protect. To protect them all, it would be useless if I'm not the strongest!」

There was also the promise he had made with his childhood friend who was always captious. He would never let that person cry again. For the sake of that, he would become stronger than anyone. That's why, no matter how strong the opponent was, Ryner had to win. There was no way he could give up before he could win.

「You'll protect everything? You're acting as though you're a hero」

「Still, that is my resolve」

「Humph, no matter how resolved you are, if you don't have strength corresponding to it, you'd just seem ridiculous」

「If it's power, I'll just increase it! Right here, right now!」

Once again, a fire lit up in Ryner's eyes. The hand that held the sword was hot. That heat, as though wanting to encroach his body, continued spreading from his right hand. His whole body pulsated, with a feeling as though his blood was boiling.
His body, his heart instantly became lighter.

「Here I come, Harold!」

Strongly kicking the ground, he surrendered his body to that floating sensation and approached Harold with a slash. By completing that series of actions, he understood.
That the him right now was swinging the sword in a sharper and faster manner than he had ever done before. And yet, he could sense that even more power was rapidly gushing forth from inside his body.

He couldn't suppress that delirious sensation. No, the Ryner, who had no intention to suppress it, started to fiercely attack Harold.

When he peeked at Harold's state, although he was repelling the attacks just like before, his expression was distorted by hatred. The sound of him clicking his tongue informed Ryner that he was pressing Harold back. Due to victory drawing closer, even more power flooded out of him.

「Uryaaaaa!」

He slashed down at Harold with all of his might. Harold barely managed to dodge it. When the sword that cut through the air hit the floor, as though to show his power, a fissure ran through it. Glancing at that, Harold murmured.

「You're using 『Brave Mode』 here? As expected, you are……..」

「Haa, ha……brave, mode……..?」

He repeated the words he had heard for the first time. And finally, he realized that he was breathing heavily. It didn't look like he could continue being in this state for a long time. Then, he would postpone anything that he needed to think about.

Readjusting his grip on the sword, while raising a voice filled with fighting spirit, he restarted attacking for the nth time.

「Deeeeiii!」

「Don't get conceited!」

This time, Harold responded. A dizzying amount of sword strike were exchanged. At the battle that couldn't be thought of as being fought by kids, the spectators swallowed their saliva, and the metallic sound of the sword clashes dominated the stadium. Everybody who were present in that place were captivated by their figures, and although they were curious about the outcome of the match, they wanted this battle to last as long as possible. Those contradictory feelings were welling up in them.
But eternity didn't exist. Eventually, the time to end the 2's battle came.

「Gu…….!」

After evading an attack, Ryner's feet got tangled, and when he was about to fall down, he somehow forcefully held his ground. That was because his body that should have been light, abruptly became heavy.
It became so heavy that it was as though the muscles in his hands and legs had been changed into lead, and it was so painful that it was as though even while trying to breath he couldn't inhale air.

(Wrong…….I've just returned, to the usual state…….)

Ryner had repeated moving in a way that he himself had thought wasn't usually possible. It was nothing more than the recoil for those actions.
He felt as though he was reaching his limits in even gripping the sword. His legs were trembling just by him standing, and it felt as though he would fall if he lost his focus even for a bit.

He fought well. In the end, he still couldn't properly hit Harold with even a single strike, but still it was a good fight.
If it was the him until yesterday, he couldn't have fought like this until the bitter end. That's why, it would be fine to rest already, right?
Harold is unrivalled.

「…….Like, I would say that!!」

The weakness that was creeping up on his heart, Ryner erased it with a loud shout. Even if he couldn't win, even if the other person was unrivalled, he would never give up. This was also for the sake of keeping his promise to Colette.
That high spirit still hadn't gone dim. On the contrary, it increased as though it was burning up all the more.
As though in concord with Ryner, the surrounding winds surged. That red hair moved like flickering flames.

The next would be the last. And because it was the end, he had to put his all into it. He would fire everything he had got. A single strike with all of his might, all his accumulated effort and all his thoughts placed into it.

If you can–

「Then try to stop iittt!!」

From the sword blade that was swung down as though wanting to cleave Harold, deep crimson flames erupted out with a heavy sound.
Those were flames that contained Ryner's will. His strong emotions that incarnated his thirst for victory.
In all of the 12 years Ryner had been alive for, this was his strongest attack. He had complete conviction that he had fired off something like that.

Those howling flames attacked Harold directly. As though wanting to swallow his body, it was in that instant when those flames conspicuously swelled up.
A white light flashed as though to completely paint over one's vision. Almost simultaneously as everyone closed their eyes due to not being able to bear it, a thunderous sound which seemed to tear the air reverberated throughout the stadium.

One person cowered, while another screamed in fear.
The thing that made all living things forcibly feel terror and peril, it was that dreadful thing's invasion.
The only people who could properly recognize that thing's identity were those who were in a place away from the stadium.

A never before seen huge bolt of lightning attacked the stadium. Suddenly raining down from the sky that was completely clear, that lightning bolt completely crushed the flames that was about to thoroughly burn Harold, without leaving even a trace behind. Naturally, there was no need to even think about whose doing it was. The only one in the stadium who was completely unwaveringly calm was Harold. He, a boy of only 13 years, had fired that.

「Haha……..seri, ously……?」

Even that one strike into which he had put his everything, until his spirit had been completely exhausted, hadn't been able to reach Harold. Not only that, he had easily outclassed Ryner. Looking at

that scene, he could do nothing other than laugh. But Ryner didn't have enough energy left to even smile.

With a blurry vision and powerless legs, without being able to move even a single finger, Ryner started falling towards the front.
The one who stopped and supported that body was Harold.
Supporting Ryner at his chest area with his right arm, Harold talked as though he was exasperated.

「Idiot. If you could do that, then you should have started off with it」

「Aren't you being way too harsh…….」

"That" surely indicated his last strike. Being cornered until he could not even properly stand on his own legs, and yet only because he had struggled until the end, wanting to win, that he was able to unleash it.
It wasn't something that could be used easily.

Ryner, who was astonished at the fact that a person more Spartan than his mother actually existed, could barely reply back in a feeble voice. Maybe due to truly exhausting all his power with that, Ryner lost his consciousness in Harold's arms. Entrusting him to the medics who came rushing, while watching Ryner being carried away on a stretcher, Harold mumbled a compliment that reached nobody.

「But well, I'll take back my words saying that you were a disappointment. Since it seems as though your power reaches at least to the level where my feet are」

Although it was thoroughly condescending, it was unmistakably a praise. There was no way Harold's words could reach Ryner, who had long lost his consciousness. But there seemed to be a somewhat satisfied smile on Ryner's face.

Author –
While being able to make the game's protagonist like a protagonist, and at the same time making Harold win, being able to write with

that premise is extremely difficult.

TL-
1.In other words, plot armor. There are many definitions for it, but the general one is- The author's work would depict developments, convenient to the play, that are favorable to the protagonist.
First time seeing plot armor being explained in a novel.

Chapter 6

The match between Ryner and Harold concluded. Colette, who was looking at that scene in a daze, came to her senses in the next instant and started running towards Ryner, who had collapsed. That magic Harold had unleashed at the end. Although it wasn't a direct hit, there was no guarantee that Ryner was safe. Without even listening to Ryner's father, Orbell, trying to restrain her, she moved her legs while being driven by anxiety.

But when she was just a bit away from the first-aid room, her path was blocked by a crowd. Even while thinking,'Why are there so many people?', Colette resolutely plunged into the crowd, and while raising her voice saying, 「Excuse me!」 「Please let me through!」, with those thin arms of hers, she pushed her way through them.

That crowd abruptly split. Due to the pressure around her suddenly disappearing, Colette pitched forward due to her momentum, but still, she reorganized her posture with her inherent sense of balance, managing to stop falling down.
And when she raised her face, her eyes met with Harold's.

「Ah…….」

Involuntarily, her voice leaked out.
It seemed as though this crowd had split because they had wanted to avoid Harold. If she were to look around, a space that was close to a circle seemed to be made up around him. Certainly, she could agree that one's knees would become weak if they were to meet him right after they had seen that lightning. Colette too, would have acted similar to them if she hadn't been saved by Harold in the past.

But just because of that, it wasn't as though she could promptly speak to him. There was a huge amount of words and gratitude she wanted to convey. But after seeing the person who had saved her life and her precious childhood friend fight, now, at this particular moment when she was in a very unstable mood, she couldn't put together any words.

Although it wasn't as though he had perceived her emotions, Harold started speaking to her.

「Is that the guy whom you have acknowledged?」

「Eh…….? Ah! Y, yes!」

Maybe because Colette's mind was considerably disturbed, even her reply was very shaky. However, she understood what Harold was speaking about and replied back.

「I thought I had told you to give that to a man who could protect you. Why did you purposely choose a weakling like that?」

'That' was most probably the necklace Harold had given her 3 years ago. From the day Ryner had accepted that necklace, he had always worn it around his neck. While in the middle of fighting, Harold must have realized that Ryner was the knight that would protect Colette.

「Ry, Ryner isn't weak at all. He will protect me」

Colette, who had replied back like that, had done so in a frail voice. However, she hadn't averted her eyes and had spoken while firmly gazing at Harold.

「Hmph, well if you're satisfied at just being protected, then that's fine. A suitable coward for a weakling to protect. At the most, you could only hold Ryner back though」

「Why are you saying something like that……」

Why Harold was rebuking the both of them, Colette couldn't understand the reason for doing that. Just, it was unbearably painful to be reproached by Harold.

「You should have personally experienced how helpless being weak is. And yet, if even after that you choose the path of living as a weakling, then suit yourself. Not like I care」

After saying only that much, as though losing his interest in Colette, Harold left. The reunion with the one had who saved her life had

just ended with a few lines being exchanged. That too, in a form of one-sidedly being abandoned.

'Why?'- only that question kept on going around inside her head. Why had Harold, who had saved the both of them, used such harsh words against her?
Without understanding the reason, when she came to her senses, there were tears floating up in her vision. It was due to Harold's irrational behavior, and was also because of the sorrow at being abandoned by him.

She wiped the tears that were about to overflow and fall down with her cuffs. When she turned her eyes towards the direction where Harold left, that back seemed to appear very distant. When she considered that gap as the distance between them, Colette's heart unnaturally tightened very much.

「…….That's right, I've to go to Ryner」

Powerlessly, Colette instructed herself. As though wanting to run away from something she didn't want to look at, she dashed towards the direction opposite to Harold. And when she reached the first-aid room, Ryner was lying with his eyes closed. According to the doctor, who was talking to Orbell, who had arrived a bit later, it seemed as though Ryner had only collapsed due to exhaustion and there were almost no external injuries.
The doctor also said that he might wake up soon since healing magic had already been used.

Ryner regained consciousness after about 10 minutes later. While groaning, Ryner opened his eyes.

「Ryner!?」

「Colette……? Uwah!」

As soon as Ryner opened his eyes, Colette embraced him as though covering him. Ryner was confused at the sudden occurrence, but as he started understanding the situation, his face steadily grew redder. The adults in the surroundings, including Orbell, read the mood and left without making any noise. The Colette, into whose

eyes those reactions didn't even enter, strengthened her embrace.

「I'm glad…….」

「What do you……ah, that's right. I lost」

Realizing that he was made to lie down on a bed, he recalled the match from until just before. Although his whole body was languid, there were no places where he felt pain.

「Are you alright? Does it hurt anywhere?」

「I'm fine. Since Harold held back」

Abruptly hearing Harold's name coming out from Ryner's mouth, Colette's expression became gloomy. Actually, although she didn't want to behave in this manner, remembering the Harold from just a short while ago, her emotions were thrown into chaos. Ryner peeked at Colette's face when she was like that.

「Did something happen?」

Ryner's eyes and voice seemed to indicate his serious concern. From the day they had exchanged that promise, Ryner had always been trying to protect Colette. And because Ryner was like that, Colette trusted him and even if it were Harold, she wouldn't permit him to look down upon Ryner.

「Say, Ryner」

「Hm?」

「Ryner will protect me, right?」

「Yeah, since I promised!……..well, I ended up losing today though」

Concluding in a poor way, Ryner scratched his head. As though to cheer him up, Colette replied with a laugh.

「Ryner isn't weak」

「Eh?」

「Although you lost to Harold-sama, you might win the next time」

「Might, huh……..wait, Harold-sama? Does Colette know Harold?」

「Yeah. In the past, he had saved me and mom. The chivalric order's necklace I gave to Ryner too was given to me by Harold-sama」

「Is that so……., perhaps, is he a noble?」

「Right」

「As expected. Amazing, that guy. He's strong, he can use magic, and he's also a noble」

'Amazing', a very simple impression. But it was actually true, Colette also thought so. What Harold showed in his match against Ryner was the difference in their level of strength.
But Ryner was the strongest among the village children. There had also been a time when he had defeated a ferocious monster alone. Harold had overpowered such a Ryner.

He was a person who had the strength to fight and also the strength to protect people. That was why, she was thankful for Harold, and also considered him a person worthy of respect. That was how much of a shock she had felt when she had been thrust away.

「Even so, that guy is way too severe. What do you think he said at the end? 『Idiot. If you could do that, then you should have started off with it』」

While imitating Harold's tone, Ryner complained. But in that figure there was no anger due to being made fun of nor any sorrow due to losing.
It wasn't a mistake to say that the flames that Ryner showed with the last strike was the best he could do right now. And it had been splendidly repelled. There was no way Ryner, who hated to lose, wasn't feeling anything.

「Aren't you frustrated?」

「Frustrated……Isn't it obvious that I'm frustrated? But more than that……..hmm, how do I say this?」

Ryner folded his arms and tilted his neck. And after groaning for a while, he spoke out these words.

「I don't clearly understand, but it didn't feel unpleasant. When he told me to do that from the start, it wasn't like he was making fun of me, but it was somewhat like…….. right, it was like when I get beaten up by mom」

Ryner's mother, Leona. Although usually she was a gentle woman, when it came to training Ryner, her mouth would become bad, and her hands would become fast.
But that was for the sake of pushing Ryner towards his dream. It was one of the ways Leona expressed her love towards him. Ryner felt something similar to that from Harold.
Although you could that it was pitiful for Ryner to feel love when he was beaten up, maybe because it was him, there were some emotions of Harold that he could read.

「Besides, if we fight again some other time, then I'll absolutely win!」

「……..I see. Do your best」

「? Aren't you somewhat dispirited?」

「Not at all」

Pushing own the words that had almost come out of her throat, Colette laughed. Losing in sword fights which he was most proud of, but still being able to look forward like this, Ryner seemed dazzling for the current Colette. She felt as though that light could relieve her cowardice, unbearably she averted her eyes.

「Right, I'll go call back Doctor and Orbell-san! Good grief, even though Ryner is awake, them just disappearing is troublesome」

Leaving behind a dry smile and those words, Colette left the first

aid room.

◇

That feeling of excitement he had forgotten a long time ago. Being stimulated by that, with his expression becoming even more looser than his usual flippant one, Cody, without even minding those odd looks he got, dashed through the main street. He wouldn't mind it even if he got caught by his subordinates. More than those trivial things, the matter with the highest priority right now was to get in touch with that black-haired boy.

Lord's ability in the sword and magic were real. Moreover, he had considerably polished them up until now.
And yet, both his skills and his body were still far from being complete. Cody felt that he still had a huge potential for growth.
How ominous. If it was him, then he could eventually equal Vincent, or perhaps, could become a person more remarkable than him.

That was why he was promising, and therefore dangerous. Because he had power different from others, if he were to err in the usage of that power, he might bring enormous harm. Then what should be done. The answer was simple. Toss him inside the den of powerful people.

「And that's why, why don't you try joining the chivalric order (us)?」

「What "And that's why". Has your head cracked?」

After appearing as though he had come cutting through the wind, to the Cody, who had solicited him with neither any greeting nor any preface, Lord hurled harsh words at him without being perturbed in the least.
Although the youth walking together with Lord was vigilant against the extremely suspicious Cody, Lord himself held him back.

「Calm down. This guy, even though he's like this, he's a member of the chivalric order」

「This person……?」

The youth made a dubious face, but that was understandable. For their first meeting, Cody, who gave off a frivolous impression even under normal circumstances, had currently taken off his armor that testified for him being in the chivalric order and was wearing clothes as though he wanted to blend in with the town. Even if he said that he was a member of the chivalric order, it would hard to believe when said so abruptly.

「Ahaha–! Due to certain circumstances, I'm wearing these clothes now, but more or less I am full-fledged member of the chivalric order」

「So, why did you come here?」

「No well, like I said before, how about joining the chivalric order? – a solicitation like that. I think that Lord-kun would do quite well with us」

「……..Let me tell you one thing. My name isn't Lord, it's Harold. Never again call me by that name」

「Hmm?」

「You hate it so much? This name」

「To the degree that I would like to involuntarily crush you」

「It seems as though the circumstances are somewhat complex. Including such matters, want to talk for a bit?」

With his thumb, Cody pointed towards a store behind him. In the Delfit, where there were an innumerable amount of bars, it was one of the few stores that handled drinks other than alcohol.
Towards that invitation, without being able to particularly complain, Harold agreed. The interior of the store was much quieter when compared to the tumult on the streets. Although there were no more than about 30 seats including the ones at the counter, an eighth of them were filled, so it seemed to be flourishing in its own way. At the only place where 3 people could sit, Cody sat down in one of the seats around the circular table and without any

hesitation, Harold took the seat directly opposite him.

In contrast to those 2, the youth who sat in between them, maybe due to still being vigilant, frequently kept glancing at Cody even after each of them lightly introduced themselves. Even when Harold was talking about his background and about the details of how he came to participate in the tournament, he wasn't making a good face. But still, it seemed as though he had no intention to stop whatever Harold was choosing to say, and while drinking the beverage at times, he was calmly lending his ears to the conversation.

「Hoho, the fake name was to fool the eyes of your parents, huh. What made you go so far to participate in this tournament?」

「Just testing my strength. Unfortunately, I couldn't test it out since there were only weaklings」

Certainly, with that much of a difference in strength, it was quite a disappointment. If there was an opponent who was even a bit worthy, then……

「But that red-haired kid you fought against in the finals. Wasn't he quite good?」

「Ha, don't make me laugh. With that level, there's not much difference between him and a rock fallen on the roadside」

「Aren't you harsh. As for me, I was about to call out to him too–」

「What did you say?」

Although it couldn't be said that it was harmonious, that spot's mood that was by no means dangerous froze up instantly. What Harold emitted abruptly was unmistakably anger.
Exposed to the pressure that was grave enough to almost overawe him, Cody involuntarily flinched. Although he didn't know which part of that conversation touched Harold's nerves, it was apparent that he rejected Cody getting in contact with Ryner.

「……But that seemed to have been a delusion. Ahaha, I give up. Somehow recently, my misunderstandings seem to have increased.

Maybe I'm getting old」

「Humph」

Although he tried to poorly gloss over it, for the time being, it seemed as though he managed to avoid problems. But still,why did Harold dislike him trying to help Ryner, to this extent.

(Maybe he has some kind of emotional attachment towards him. Come to think of it, the final battle too seemed somewhat like he was trying to instruct him)

At first, he had thought that Harold wanted to harass him, but until the end, he had never directly attacked Ryner. Although it seemed to have been fought in the same way as he had done throughout the tournament, even though he had made all his other opponents until then concede within the blink of an eye, he was different towards Ryner.
Without using that speed which was his greatest strength, he had received Ryner's attacks, and had either parried or evaded them. By Harold doing so, Ryner had been cornered, and he had unleashed power that had crossed his limits. If said in other words, Harold had been trying to draw that out.

(Well, only he knows the truth though)

Although he was curious, it wasn't information that was necessary at the current situation. The most important thing was whether Harold was interested in joining the chivalric order or not. Wanting to loosen the stiff air, Cody once again started talking in a light tone.

「Well then, once again, let's get to the main issue. Harold-kun, do you want to try joining the Saint King's chivalric order?」

「…….」

Folding his arms, Harold remained silent. Even for him, there might be many things he needed to think about. Thereupon, waiting for the right time to speak within the silence, Itsuki opened his mouth.

「Um, Cody-san. If I'm right, then only those above 16 years old

can join the Saint King's chivalric order. Harold-kun is still 13 years old, you know? 」

「 Hm, well, generally it's like that. But exceptions always exist in everything. Even one of my acquaintance had also entered at an age of only 14 years 」

「 Exceptions, is it 」

「 Right, right! Well practically, it's very rare, right? It means that that is how much talent and potential I feel from Harold-kun 」

This was genuinely the truth. Listening to the words talent and potential, even Itsuki closed his mouth. Since it was the him who had been seeing Harold much more closely than Cody, he could understand many things.

「 Within those exceptions, who was the youngest to have entered? 」

Harold, who had been silently thinking, asked such a question.

「 It was the 14 year old boy who came up in this conversation. His name is — Vincent 」

'Didn't you implicitly want to know?' with those feelings included, Cody said that name.
Vincent Van Westerfort.
Called the "Strongest" by the Saint King's chivalric order, he was made out to be a monster by them, and was envied by many people as a hero.

「 ……..Fine then. Let me join the chivalric order 」

But when he heard that name, Harold laughed. As though showing his thoughts of wanting to challenge the strongest.

Chapter 7

Although Harold had immediately agreed to Cody's invitation, when thinking normally, it was not something that could arbitrarily be decided by a child. Maybe due to feeling curious about it, Itsuki incessantly asked Harold about how he would convince his parents, after Cody left . But as for Harold, he did not think that it would become a huge obstacle.

Harold's parents were the type of people who were obsessed with appearance and titles. And entering the Saint King's chivalric order was considered to be an extremely honorable matter.

Since the chivalric order was a force different from the county's military, an elite troop directly under the control of the King. There was also the past that his father, Hayden, was aiming to join it when he was young.

If those parents' beloved son was to be scouted by the chivalric order that was an elite troop, then what would happen was as clear as day.

Harold, who had obtained the Cody's contact address, as though he had no more business with this city, left Delfit the next day.

Without even stopping by the Sumeragi territory along the way, Harold, who had returned to the Stokes mansion after a journey of 2 weeks, immediately reported to his parents.

"What is it, wanting to speak formally?"

"There's something I needed to inform father and mother about. While I was staying in Delfit, I was scouted by a person from the Saint King's chivalric order."

"What! Is that true !?"

"Yes. If I wanted to, it would be immediate, it seems. I'll be the youngest person in history to enter"

"Amazing, Harold!"

“I want to enter the chivalric order. Is that fine?”

“Of course!”

As he had predicted, their reactions after listening to him were superb. Especially Hayden’s delight, it did not seem to be ordinary. The dream that he could not achieve in the past has been accomplished by his son, was what he might have I have been thinking.

When he had gone to watch Delfit’s fighting tournament together with Erika, they had encountered rioters who were making an uproar, and when he splendidly suppressed them, he was scouted- when he spouted out some convenient story like that, they did not even doubt him at all. On the contrary, saying, “A banquet!”, they immediately started preparing for a celebration. Although they understood, it seemed as though they had no intention to stop him.

(Even the chivalric order leaves for danger zones though. Even if for argument’s sake, what will they do if their eldest son were to die?)

While looking at his ecstatic parents, he was thinking of such things. Well, since he had had the intention to join the chivalric order even when he knew that it would be dangerous, not being allowed to join it would be troublesome. And also, even Hayden was a militaristic man, so he must have understood about those matters.

And so, Harold, who had promptly received his parents’ acknowledgment, went around the mansion, which was in a flurry for preparing for the abruptly held banquet, as though it had nothing to do with him, and called Norman and Jake, and while at it, even Zen to his room. Harold informed the 3 of them.

“I’m going to the imperial capital to become a member of the Saint King’s chivalric order. Although the Sumeragi hold the initiative for LP farming, even if there’s no movement, periodically inform me about the situation here.”

“If it’s the imperial capital, it’s quite distant”

“It is not a distance that can be covered by fast horses, and if we want to get in contact regularly, it’ll be limited to using letters”

“In that case, it’ll take a bit of time.”

“Not a problem. In the case where you have to notify me immediately at any cost, cooperate with the Sumeragi. I’ll inform them beforehand.”

“Understood.”

To grasp the movements of the Stokes house even when he’s absent, he arranged a way to communicate beforehand. It was for the sake of responding as fast as possible when the situation changed if by chance any indications of turbulent movements were to appear.

But there was a person who interrupted them.

“P, please wait for a moment! Harold-sama, you’re entering the chivalric order?”

“That’s what I said. Are your ears there for decoration?”

“No, no, no, even Norman-san and Jake-san simply just let it go, you know! Is not it a normally outrageous matter !?”

Zen was quite agitated. A normally outrageous matter- leaving aside whether it was grammatically correct or not, he understood what Zen was trying to say. But since it was troublesome, Harold decided to ignore him.

“That’s all. Immediately return to your work.”

“Yes.”

Norman and Jake bowed and left the room, and even Zen, who seemed as though he still wanted to ask him something, left with them. When he was alone in the room, Harold exhaled slowly. It could be taken as breathing deeply or as sighing.

The emotions put into it, whether they were the feelings of loneliness due to leaving the house that he had gotten familiar to or

whether they were the feelings of liberation being able to escape from his parents eyes, Harold himself was unsure which it was.

3 years.

That was the amount of time since he had come to this world without even understanding the reason. And within that, he had spent the most amount of time in this mansion, inside this room.

It was not as though he felt nothing when he was going away from that.

Nonetheless, entering the chivalric order was a predetermined route for the sake of following the original work. It was just that the schedule had accelerated up a bit.

Harold, who had promptly made a decision to stop his heart from wavering, with the polite speech and ingratiating smile that activated only in front of his parents, suitably spent his time at the grand banquet which was held the next day to celebrate his joining the chivalric order. Not even waiting for a month after he had been scouted, Harold quickly departed from the mansion.

Holding the reins in a completely familiar manner, he rode on a horse for a few hours. For the sake of meeting up with Cody, he reached the toll booth set up in the middle of the specified highway.

Even though it was called a toll booth, it was an establishment not for collecting tax or goods, but for checking whether there were any suspicious people or people who were trying to carry in dangerous or prohibited goods. A stone wall had been erected as though to blockade the highway, and one could not move further if one did not pass through it.

Harold, who was equipped lightly, was able to easily enter the toll booth after clearing a light luggage search. It was quite lively since simple tents to rest one's body were set up and merchants on their journey had, while taking a break, opened up compact stalls.

Finding a group that were donning white armor in one corner,

Harold got down from the horse and went towards them while walking. After he got closer by a certain extent, the other side also noticed Harold's existence, and while waving his hands, Cody raised his voice saying, "Oooi!". Due to that, the group's gaze concentrated on Harold.

"Well, well, Harold-kun. We met again much faster than I expected."

"I did not come here to meet you. More than that, do not break your promise to let me enter the chivalric order, alright?"

"I'm telling you, it's fine."

There was no reaction even though he tried pushing him. Honestly, he was still doubting whether him being scouted was really true or not. Harold knowing Cody's personality made it even more harder for him to erase those thoughts. Well, since although he might deceive but not outright lie, the possibility of scouting him itself being a lie was low.

"Say, no way Captain was talking about this kid, right?"

As though wedging into the conversation, standing next to Cody, a girl wearing the same white armor as him observed Harold as though she was appraising him.

"Hm? That's right."

"You're joking right? Is not he still a kid?"

Although, the one saying that had an appearance of a 17 to 18 year old girl. Although what the girl was saying was right since in this world, if one became 16 they, would be treated as an adult, from the senses that Harold had , the girl too was still a child. Instead, it was obvious for him to feel that he was the adult since his mental age was more than 20 years.

"Ha, then are you a miserable small fry even lower than a kid?"

That's why, unintentionally, these words suddenly came out.

“Wh, what did you say !?”

The girl, who did not think that he would retort back like that so clearly, took a step backwards due to being bewildered. And there, the girl’s back bumped against something. When the girl turned back due to realizing who that was, as though substituting herself, he was pushed into Harold’s field of vision.

Huge. The first thing Harold thought was that. And next, he realized that that frightening face looked somewhat fiendish at a glance. Being exposed to that stare, it’s intensity was enough to make one submit unconditionally. While being frightened enough to almost let out some weird voice, he probed the mood of the man who seemed like he wanted to say something.

“Do you also have a problem with me? In that case, I’ll make you understand with your body together with that girl.”

Naturally, his inner state of being frightened was not shown outside. But at that, every single person except Cody appeared as though they were surprised. The man with the scary face asked Harold, who was worried thinking, ‘Maybe they drew back because my mouth was too sharp? ‘

“Y, you …… are not you afraid of me?”

“I do not understand what there is to be afraid of you. After all, even if we fought, I would be the one to win.”

Harold’s mouth, without minding his true feelings at all, easily disregarded the man’s question. There had been no talk about winning or losing and this man was also from the chivalric order. Since he had enough strength to join it, it would not be just for mere show. He wanted to restrain using aggressive words as much as possible towards a person who would become his colleague. Well, Harold himself knew that he could not expect this mouth to give consideration towards matters like that.

“You people, Harold-kun has only been invited and he still has not officially become a member of the chivalric order, alright? To start with, how about at least introducing yourselves?”

“S, sorry about that. I’m called Robinson”

“…… Aileen”

“I’m Shido! I welcome you, Harold!”

The man with the tall stature and frightening face was Robinson, the harsh girl next to him was Aileen and the man with orange hair that could be associated with a lion’s mane was Shido, was how

they introduced themselves. And hearing their names, Harold's body stiffened.

(Are not these guys also characters who will die!)

That was the reason. Cody quitting the chivalric order, in other words, his motive for founding Friel. The cause was because he let Robinson and the others, who were his direct subordinates, die in a certain battle.

In the original work, behind Cody's easy-going attitude, he blamed his powerlessness in his heart, and was always worrying whether him turning back on the chivalric order had been the right choice.

Although in the final stages of the game, that kind of hesitation and inner conflicts could be resolved, the problem was that if things went in the same way as the original work, then Robinson and the others would die. A detailed explanation regarding their death had not been shown in the narrative. In one of the scenes in the game, Cody would speak out their names while gazing at the moon, or Cody's past becoming clear after he loses subordinates in an event, only these kinds of fragmented information was shown. Naturally, there was no way something like their character settings existed, and even concerning their visual appearance, he had only seen them now.

Even if he wanted to save them, because the information was almost nonexistent, he could not come up with any plans. The only thing that he knew was in which battle they had participated and lost their lives. And more than anything else, if by chance they survived, it would mean even more derailment of the original work. This was because if Robinson and the others were saved, the probability was exceedingly high that the story of Cody quitting the chivalric order and founding Friel was going to be destroyed.

If that were to happen, the events that could originally be cleared by borrowing Friel's power would not be possible. In the worst case, it would be checkmate.

In other words, Harold was compelled to make a choice. Would he give priority to his survival rate and let them die without helping

them. Or would he become resolved for the destruction of the original work by evading the future that awaited Robinson and the others .

Even if it was uncertain, exactly because he knew the future of this world, he understood that his choice was literally to either kill himself or kill others. Even while knowing, but still he had to choose.

Harold keenly realized that this might be the fate, which seemed similar to a curse from which he could escape by no means, that was determined upon him the moment he decided to live as Harold Stokes.

Translated by Madao.

Chapter 8

「……What do you guys think? About Harold」

When they had started preparing for camping since the sun was sinking, Aileen lowered her voice and asked. Being questioned, Robinson and Shido exchanged glances, and after a short pause they each answered respectively.

「Isn't he a good kid?」

「He's strong?」

「I do think that he is somewhat strong, but there's no way he's a good kid」

All of a sudden being insulted as a miserable small fry lower than a kid, there was no way Aileen could accept Robinson's opinion.

「Is that so?」

「After all, it's just that Robin is thinking like that because someone wasn't afraid after meeting you for the first time」

「That is, well…….」

He couldn't deny that his impression of Harold, who didn't even seem to be afraid or perturbed regarding his greatest complex, was certainly high.

「Either way, since he wasn't frightened by Robin, doesn't it mean that he has gone through his fair share of fights?」

She couldn't voice up any objections towards Shido's opinion. All of them mostly had the same opinion. Frankly speaking, it wasn't wrong to say that Robinson's face was a deadly weapon. His appearance was so atrocious that even an adult would quake in fear. All the more if it were a kid, and for a kid around Harold's age, it wouldn't be strange for them to burst into tears. That was the three's common perception.

Although it wasn't particularly arranged beforehand, the three's gazes simultaneously concentrated on Harold. That appearance of him adding twigs to the fire while making a displeased face could only be seen as a kid appropriate for his age. But in reality, since he was recommended for the chivalric order at an age of only 13 years, he must be hiding an absurd amount of power.

They couldn't affirm it because they still hadn't seen his strength with their own eyes, and also because he was acknowledged by Cody, whose irresponsible behavior was standing out, they couldn't believe it. Although, they knew in their heads that there was no way he would invite him as joke. And suddenly, Shido muttered.

「Or rather, let's try to directly talk to him」

No sooner had Shido said that than he quickly finished constructing the tent. And then, he plonked down without any reservations in front of Harold, with the fire in between them and started talking to him.

「Yo, Harold. Is it fine for a bit?」

「What is it?」

「It's nothing much, just that we only know each others' names, so I thought maybe we could deepen our friendship a bit」

「…….Do what you want」

Even while making an annoyed face, Harold accepted Shido's proposal. Seeing that reaction, Robinson and Aileen also got closer.

「By the, I had wanted to ask from before, but where did you meet the Squad Captain? The person himself isn't telling no matter how many times I ask him」

「At Delfit's fighting tournament」

「That's where we had been garrisoned…… 」

「Ah, are you perhaps the child who knocked down the drunkard?」

Robinson's memory flashed back. Because Harold was far, Robinson couldn't confirm his face, but when he thought back to it, his physique and atmosphere was quite close to the boy in his memory.

「You knew about something like that, huh」

「But I think that Captain didn't invite you at that time though……」

「That guy came right after the first day of the tournament got over. He didn't open his mouth because him slacking off might have gotten out. Since he wasn't wearing the armor」

「…….Come to think of it, there was a day where he left all the patrolling to us and disappeared somewhere」

That day being hectic due to Cody abandoning his duties was still a recent event in the three's memories. Listening to Harold, Aileen groaned, 「Squad Captaain ~ ?」, in such a low voice that it seemed to creep on the ground and went towards Cody. Her eyes were glazed over.

「What happened to that girl so suddenly?」

「Aah, she went to drop lightning or something on the Squad Captain. It's usual」

Although he was severely remonstrated after the fighting tournament, it seemed as though that anger had returned. While Shido laughingly explained to Harold that this was a scene that he would get used to even if he didn't want to, Robinson, who had a puzzled face for some reason, entered his vision.

「……..It seems as though Harold-kun participated in the fighting tournament, but was it in the under-13 division?」

「That's right」

As though implicitly wanting to say, 「So what」, Harold narrowed his already sharp eyes even further. While being somewhat pressured, Robinson continued talking.

「What was the result?」

「Isn't it obvious that I won」

Harold declared as though it was natural. Shido, sensing Robinson's intent in asking that question, closed his mouth, choosing to see how things would go. And then, Robinson approached the heart of the matter.

「……..That day, when we were patrolling the town, an enormous bolt of lightning struck from the sky. And from what I've heard, it seems as thought that was a magic used by the victor of the under-13 division」

That is to say, the one who brought down that lightning bolt, if the rumor he had heard was right, was Harold. If that lightning strike had indeed been brought down by Harold, then could agree with Cody recommending him for the chivalric order without waiting for the stipulated age. That was how tremendously strong that magic was.

「Was that your magic?」

「…… 『Bolt Lance』」

With the sun about to completely sink, a flash cut through the dusky sky. A single long lance of lightning fired off towards the sky rose up to higher altitudes. The bolt of lightning that seemed as though it would disappear beyond the sky like that itself struck a monster, a large ominous bird that was about 3 meters, and knocked it down. The monster that was burnt black was completely annihilated.

「This is the answer. Are you satisfied?」

Harold, who had annihilated a monster with a single strike of magic that was activated with no preliminary actions or chants, without changing his expression by even a little bit, spat out in an annoyed tone.
Robinson and Shido were dumbfounded at the event that was too abrupt. At a place a little away from them, even Aileen, who had

been scolding Cody, was gaping blankly without being able to grasp the situation. Cody, who was the only one that wasn't perturbed, escaped from the lectured with an 'Alright!' expression on his face.

「What's wrong, Harold-kun. I'll be startled if you suddenly use magic though」

「Because you couldn't explain about me since you ran away wanting to protect yourself. Don't make extra work for me」

「If you say it like that, Onii-san will be troubled since I can't say anything in response」

Without even looking troubled in the least bit, he laughed away the harsh words from Harold. And then, he made a 'pon' sound with his hands as though he had hit upon a great idea, and without even seeming to feel even a bit of the heavy atmosphere, he changed the topic.

「But, well, leaving that aside, even the sun has set, so how about we have dinner soon. Wasn't there some pickled kujimana[1] still remaining?」

As though nothing had happened, Cody rummaged around for the snacks for alcohol. Looking at him, not only Harold but even the other three sighed as though they were exhausted.

◇

Inside a tranquil room, only the sound of a pen running over a parchment was heard in a constant rhythm. There were no gaps within the bookshelf furnished on one side of the wall, and looking at the books arranged in the order of their titles, the methodical personality of this room's owner revealed itself.

The owner, Vincent Van Westerfort silently continued moving the pen. Maybe due to facing the mountain of documents for a long period of time, he lifted his face while massaging his shoulders which as expected were feeling tired. Facing him was his aide, Shannon, who was also immersed in paperwork like him.

Thinking about taking a break soon, when he was about to call out

to her, he suddenly realized that it quite noisy outside the window. While thinking whether there was any training or something today, he peeked outside and found out that a crowd had formed in the training grounds.

「Vincent-sama, did something happen?」

「Shannon, was there any joint training for today?」

「There shouldn't have been any schedule issued for it…….」

To Shannon, who was inwardly tilting her head due to not grasping the reason for the question, who replied like that, Vincent pointed outside the window.

「That is……. it seems as though the people from the platoons have gathered there. I can see some of the Troop Leader's faces」

The question was what they were doing there. Thinking from how Vincent hadn't heard about it, it might be a matter that could be solved by their own judgment.

「Ya-hoo. Is Vincent here?」

While he was puzzling his head over what kind of gathering that was, the door to the office was rudely opened without even being knocked. The voice that came simultaneously with the door opening was one that couldn't be simply expressed as one that he had gotten sick hearing, of his crony's.[2]
That old friend's name was Cody Rujial. Although there was a difference of heaven and earth between vice captain and squad leader, their relationship was one where they knew about each other so thoroughly that it was enough to make them sick.

And so, since Cody had appeared here, he instinctively perceived that the clamor in the training grounds was his scheme. When he thought about it, he hadn't seen Cody's appearance for the past few days. During that time he might have plotted something.

「It's you, huh. What is this clamor?」

「It's not good to make assumptions, Vice Captain-sama……..

though you're right. There's going to be an enrollment exam held for a newbie right now, so please pay attention」

「Really, you are…….. I just beg you not to cause any problems」

「That depends on that guy」

'Kukuku', laughed Cody trying to stifle it. Even for Vincent who had known him for a long time, that laughter, as though Cody was really enjoying himself, was something he hadn't seen for a long time. Was the existence whom he called 'that guy' making him do so?

「For now, look at the training grounds from here. Perhaps, you might be able to see something amusing?」

After saying only that much, Cody left without even closing the door. In the room that had once again regained silence, sighs from the 2 people overlapped.

「That person is as boisterous as always」

While closing the door that was left open, a little bit of disgust came out of Shannon. For a diligent person like her, Cody, who behaved irresponsibly, wasn't a very likeable existence. Although she wasn't harsh because she knew about his personality and him being Vincent's old friend, her true feelings were that she wanted him get it together.

「That uninhibited nature is by birth, there's no way it would get fixed after all this time. And also, in public places, he is a person who can behave suitably」

「I understand, but…… I think that how Vincent-sama deals with him is soft」

Hearing the word soft, Vincent's heart ached as though it was pricked. From when was it that he had started feeling guilty towards Cody? If it looked as though he was dealing with him too softly, the cause was surely because that.

Originally, Cody wasn't a person who would fit into an organization

like the chivalric order that honored tradition and law. The person himself understood that. But still, he had lived here for more than 10 years. In this place that was suffocating him and wasn't suitable for him.

「…….No, the one that isn't truly suitable is me」

「Did you say something?」

「It's nothing」

As though wanting to avert his eyes from the negative feelings that were welling up, he shook his head. While trying to gloss over the words that unintentionally leaked out, Vincent threw open the window. A gentle breeze blew into the room. While being brushed by that wind, he breathed out heavily.

「Let's take a break for a while, Shannon-kun」

「Then I'll prepare some black tea」

「Ah, thank you」

Although he couldn't grasp Cody's true intentions, since he said that much, there must have been something that he wanted to show him. It was that guy. There was also the possibility that he would show something worthless.

But, that smile of Cody's just now crossed through his mind. It was carved long ago into his memories, something that made Vincent remember his longing. That's why, he felt that he wanted believe in it. A nostalgic Cody's smile, like a boy unable to contain his amusement without being able to wait to see the other person's reaction.

TL –
1. Some kind of eatable in that world maybe.
2. The word used is kusare en which translates to undesirable but inseparable relationship.

Chapter 9

In the imperial capital Amajil, there was a castle called Regalia castle. It was the so-called royal castle where the royalty that ruled over the country lived, and it was also the place where the high level executives that managed the country discussed affairs.

This Regalia castle was situated at almost the exact center of the capital and because it was erected on an artificially built rectangular platform, it was a symbolic structure that could be seen from anywhere within the capital.

And at the foot of Regalia castle, stone walls had been built as though to enclose the platform. Those walls had 2 places at the north and south where gates were placed, and the distance to the castle from the walls in a straight line was about 150 meters. The space that expanded between the platform and the walls in the form of passages surrounding the castle did not only function as a fortress in the times of emergencies, but was also the core of the military unit directly under the supervision of the King, the Saint King's chivalric order.

Starting form the headquarters that supervised the whole chivalric order, lodging for the residence of the members and training grounds for them were included, and excluding the people who were on long term expeditions or placed at other locations, all the members of the Saint King's chivalric order ate and slept within these grounds.

While receiving this explanation from Robinson and the others, Harold partially ignored it while waiting for the time to come. By the way, inwardly, even now he felt as though his legs would give out when he looked at Robinson's face.

Even at the time in the middle of their journey towards the imperial capital, when he was pressed for confirmation of him being able to use magic from Robinson, he had spontaneously fired out magic due to fear. Although he had conquered his fear to a certain extent by fighting against monsters, Robinson's appearance was shocking enough to shake even that mental strength.

"…… Rather than that, where did that guy go?"

"I think that he'll come back soon. Well, it's fine to simply wait without minding it."

" 'In the meanwhile, become an exhibit', is it? Do not screw around."

As if his inward annoyance was oozing out, Harold spat that out. His true feelings were unusually in agreement with his words. The reason was the situation that surrounded Harold and the others currently.

At the training grounds that was being used for inter-personal combat drills, Harold was standing stock still while being surrounded at a distance by a great number of the members of the chivalric order.

That face was irritation personified. After they arrived at the imperial capital, when he thought they were passing through the chivalric order's establishment directly, the person responsible disappeared before he knew it, and on top of it, because he had been neglected and left as an exhibit, it was not unreasonable that he was like that.

"Yaa yaa, Sorry for the wait."

Without even noticing even a little bit of Harold's irritation, Cody returned in his usual lax manner.

Restraining his urge to send Cody flying with a kick, Harold demanded an explanation about the situation for now.

"You bastard, where had you gone. To begin with, who are they?"

"Sorry, sorry, I had some small business, you see. And, I want Harold-kun to fight with those guys. The thing called enrollment examination?"

"What?"

Harold was not the only one who reacted to Cody's words. All the

members who had gathered also burst out in murmurs. It seemed as though they too had not been given an explanation beforehand. And then, a bearded man questioned Cody.

“What’s this, Cody. We only heard that we’ll be testing the fledglings though”

“That’s right. This fight will act as both that test and also as an enrollment exam for him.”

With those words, all gazes concentrated on Harold. And what everybody were thinking was voiced out by the bearded man.

“By enrollment exam, you mean for that kid? No matter how you look at it, he has not reached the stipulated age.”

(This conversation again …… And also, as expected, he does not go through any ordinary means, this bastard!)

He’d predicted that there would be something looking at Cody’s personality, and it was just as he had thought. Since it had already proceeded up to this extent, it was not as though he hated it so much, but Harold wished that Cody had at least talked to him before. Well, most probably he would have kept quiet due to some stupid reason like, “I thought I would surprise you.”

“In the first place, although they’re called fledglings, they’ve already trained for more than 2 years and even though it’s a small amount, they also have experience in real fights. For a kid, they’re opponents that are a bit too much. “

What he had said was reasonable. Although the amount of people who wanted to join the chivalric order was huge, the acceptance rate was quite low. Also, many people would quit after becoming members of the chivalric order due to the harsh training, and if they failed the test after enrollment, they would be dealt as leaving in groups.

The majority of them were eliminated like this, and after surviving even harsher training and real combats, 3 years after their enrollment, they would finally be able to escape being treated as

newbies.

They would get treated as first-rate a few years from then, about 5 years from the enrollment. Mind and body, unless both of these were tough, they would not be able to reach it.

In the first place, the only ones that would be enrolled were those whose superior talent and strength were acknowledged. Among them, those who were selected even though they were inexperienced were the ones called “fledglings” by him.

“Those things are fine. Since this child is an extraordinary talent.”

But Cody did not even pay any attention to that very reasonable opinion. On the contrary, he said this towards the members who would fight against Harold.

“Instead, if you guys underestimate him and attack lightly, you’ll have a painful experience so be careful. Or rather, if you guys are able to defeat Harold-kun, it’s fine for me to recommend you for the next promotion examination”

The way he said it was similar to saying that those at the level of new recruits could not defeat Harold.

If he said so much, there no way anyone in the chivalric order would not get unhappy. Although they were still new recruits, they had completely devoted themselves to training and had achieved their current title. They had the conceit in the effort they had piled up and the pride of being a member of the chivalric order.

Even though it was like that, being brought as an opponent for a child’s enrollment examination and having themselves being seen as inferior was not a good feeling. Instigated by Cody, it could be felt with one’s skin that the members of the chivalric order were thinking of overturning the assessment that could only be thought of as unreasonable.

“Well, since it’s like that, do your best.”

With a face that was saying ‘I’ve done it now’, Cody lightly clapped Harold’s shoulder. But with only this level, Harold’s arrogance did

not even bend. From the beginning, accumulating combat experience had been the next most important issue after evasion of death flags.

Although he was somewhat mad at this surprise attack like development, the situation that was prepared itself was something that he wished for.

“Cody”

“What is it?”

“Let me praise you.”

While speaking out arrogant words in his usual manner, the corners of his mouth rose up spontaneously. He often felt it after he had possessed this body, a high which could also be called as fighting instinct. That passion was lit in his heart, and the heat was spreading throughout his whole body.

He calmly grasped that in a corner of his mind. It was not the first time he had felt like this.

It was the same when he crossed swords with Itsuki and also when he had confronted a monster for the first time. That thing which appeared in front of a battle that made him feel strong tension was probably something like the vestiges of the original Harold.

Only by defeating strong opponents could he flaunt his strength, his excellence. He had drowned in the joy that could be obtained by doing that. Therefore, the original Harold absolutely did not acknowledge a thing like defeat which would be like denying himself. That was why, after being defeated by Ryner in the original work, Harold craved for even more power and because of that he led himself to ruin.

(In a sense, he’s a battle junkie. Although, his nature was nasty because he did not genuinely want power, but because he would be envied and glorified for being strong)

That was the original Harold’s true nature, but ironically, it would not become a flaw in the current situation. Although the origin was

warped, basically, the stronger the opponent was, the more his desire for victory increased. And those thoughts would influence his movements during the time of battle.

To make him more faster, more sharper and more accurate.

Stronger the opponent, more disadvantageous the situation, the sharper his body and techniques would get. It had already been verified during repeated battles.

However, recently, starting with the bouts against Itsuki, he had been getting farther away from tense battles against strong opponents. This was because he had gotten used to it while he was increasing the number of fights.

But now, this time's enrollment examination that was going to be conducted due to Cody, was something that satisfied both Hirasawa Kazuki's motives and Harold Stokes' craving for glory.

While taking up a stance after removing his sword from its sheath, Harold opened his mouth turning towards the members of the chivalric order.

He just wanted to normally say, 'please treat me well'.

"Start attacking from those who want to lose."

Obviously, the words that were actually spoken out were as usual, and like Harold wished for it, were completely different words. Maybe because these words had pushed him, a single youth walked out from within the group. An uncommon amount of fighting spirit was overflowing from those eyes. He was completely serious. Harold smiled wryly thinking how this mouth was really a genius at instigating people. For the others, it might have looked as though he was sneering.

"Squad Captain Cody, is what you said just now the truth?"

The youth that walked out saluted and questioned Cody. Those movements and his manner of speaking were brisk.

"Of course! Well, that's only if you win against him though."

“Yes, thank you very much!”

After saluting like a role model, he turned towards Harold.

“Boy, sorry but I’ll be getting serious. But still, this is also a good chance for you to know how small your world actually is.”

“Much obliged for your very fine opinion. As a thanks, let me have you grovel on the ground.”

Stomping on the youth’s words, Harold stepped forward and faced him. With those 2 at the center, a tingling sense of tension started spreading out.

“For now, anything is fine as long as the both of do not die or try to kill each other. Well then, start whenever you want ～”

“Stepping forward!”

When Cody called out in voice that was too light contrary to the situation, almost simultaneously, the youth rushed towards Harold. As expected of being trained thoroughly, his movements were fast. Even the sword that was swung down from the overhead position had a considerable amount of power. But that was it.

Harold, who slipped through the sword strike coming down from above, stepped in towards his opponent’s chest and thrust the sword edge at the chain-mail on his abdomen.

‘! Gakin’ -. With a metallic sound, the youth moved as though he was knocked, retreated 2 to 3 steps while staggering, and then fell face up It seemed as though the stab’s shock reached towards the armor’s innards and caused him to faint . Cody peeked at the collapsed boy’s face.

“…… His eyes are completely spinning, this is hopeless. Oi, somebody, get a stretcher.”

“Yes!”

After seeing off the youth being carried away, Harold once again sent a sharp gaze towards the knights.

Pierced by that sharp gaze, some of them were pressured and shrunk their shoulders. But without without minding that, Harold invited them.

“Next, come.”

Harold had something he wanted to confirm and also wanted to test and see in this examination. That was why, for now, he pushed aside any unnecessary thoughts and concentrated on fighting.

The one who came forward next was a brawny man who had a larger stature than the previous youth. Without opening his mouth, he gave a bow. When they faced towards each other, this time, Harold moved first.

Firstly, as a trial, he lightly crossed swords. While they kept on exchanging blows, he gradually increased his speed, but the man was able to easily keep up. When his speed became as fast as how it was when he usually fought with Itsuki , the man was still unperturbed. As he had heard, they seemed to have considerable strength. Confirming that, Harold took some distance temporarily.

.. And then, he unraveled his stance by loosely hanging down his sword and exposed a defenseless state Surpassing intrepidity, a warped smile as though looking down on his opponent was plastered on that face This was what was written on the completely provoking face – ‘ Come and see ‘.

Maybe the man could not tolerate that behavior that spoke more eloquently than words. He came slashing at Harold. That speed was remarkably faster than the first exchange, and the strike was much more stronger.

Harold parried that with his sword …… something like that did not happen. While still loosely hanging the right hand that gripped the sword, he did nothing but evade his opponent’s strikes. It seemed as though he had no intention to shift to the counterattack, and he was seriously observing his opponent’s behavior while he was attacking incessantly. For the time, it was about a few minutes. By doing nothing but evasion, he got confirmation.

(I thought perhaps, but it actually existed, huh. Characteristic motion)

Characteristic motion was as it's name said, it indicated movements that were already fixed. Game characters each had their own motion that was fixed. The person whom Harold was confronting now was a member of the chivalric order, in game specifications, a character called " Knight 1 ".

As the game "Brave Hearts" progressed, one would battle the "Knights", who appeared as enemy characters, many times. They did not hold a setting other that a knight's, in other words, existences that were called small fry characters. Therefore, various movements, motions were unified. Those became the characteristic motions of the knights.

The occasion on which he had realized that characteristic motion existed in this world was during battle with monsters. At first, he was doing his fullest to only just fight, but as he got used to combat, when he got the leeway to observe the opponent , he realized that they were using movements that he was familiar with.

The attacks unleashed and the timing and category of magic that was used from then on completely matched with the movements in the game screen in his memories.

Naturally, the times they showed motion that was not there in the game was many, but still being able to know the opponents next move would become extraordinarily advantageous. Due to that, his sense of stability in battle rapidly increased. That was why, Harold thought like this next – Would not characteristic motion exist even for human characters?

But although it was fine until hitting upon that possibility, the problem was that he had no chances for fighting against characters that he knew. There were no opponents for him to ascertain it. The thing that unexpectedly came by at such a time was Delfit's fighting tournament. Thinking that he might be able to fight against mob characters that were identical to the knights, he decided to participate.

But when he actually looked at the situation, his opponents were only kids. Ryner, the only person whose characteristic motion he knew about there, still had not reached the age he had been in the original work, and so, had not come with movements like in the game.

But today, after about a little less than 2 years had passed since he had hit upon it, it was verified that Harold's hypothesis was right. Of course, although there was further need for much more inspection, there was a high possibility to obtain the advantage of reading ahead even in inter-personal combat. And so, since Harold was naturally in a good mood, that atrocious smile's deepness kept increasing. And it was indeed easy to evade the knight's sword that had many strikes due to characteristic motion, and Harold, who continued to evade with a paper-thin difference as though he had enough to spare, seen from the others around him looked as though he was playing around with his opponent with a clear difference in their power.

Maybe getting impatient at the present condition, the knight took some distance. Thereupon, he somewhat lowered his center of gravity a little and took a posture as though he was bracing himself. This was the motion when knights activated magic. A light blue magic formation emerged at the knight's feet. For Harold, if he that much information, he could narrow down the magic.

(.. No matter which magic, the knights' motion is fixed And a blue magic formation, they can only use 1 category of the water attribute magic That means, the one that he is going to use is -)

Harold stuck out his left hand forward and spoke the name of that magic.

"Aqua Slash!"

When the both of them simultaneously yelled that out, an innumerable amount of water blades appeared in midair. The blades which were about 30 cm long, each went flying towards their respective opponents, but they clashed exactly at around the middle of the 2 of them , and due to that shock, a sheet of water was raised up and then it died out.

This too was what Harold had aimed for.

In the original work, once magic was activated, it could only be either evaded or defended against. Neither physical attacks nor magic could negate it. But that was only a specification inside the game. If it was this world, magic could be negated by magic. This had already been demonstrated.

When Harold looked at him, the opponent's face was dyed with shock. Naturally, even he knew that magic could be negated by magic. But that was a phenomenon that happened only by pure coincidence in the middle of a battle and even mistakenly was not something that could be "aimed" for. Although the technique of hitting magic, which had a fast attack speed, with magic itself was difficult, fundamentally if magic were not intercepted by magic of the same attribute and scale, it could not be negated. The action that Harold showed in the fighting tournament, of negating flames by lightning, was accomplished only because the magic was more powerful than the opponent's and it was forcefully suppressed.

And on top of that, basically, until the magic was activated, there was no way to perceive what kind of magic the opponent would use. If one tried to stop magic using this method, then there was a need to constantly fire high powered magic . Frankly speaking, it's efficiency was poor and it was not something that could be included in tactics. That was the common sense with regards to this world.

Nonetheless, that was something that was in regards to this world and that kind of common sense would not work on Harold. Recovering from the shock, the man once again shifted to the offensive. But that speed and sharpness from until before was not present in the attacks. Both sword and magic attacks' accuracy became rougher. For the people who did not understand the trick, Harold had simply flaunted his overwhelming talent. It would not be strange if they had even gotten disturbed. Because, if it were like this, both evasion and defense would become easier.

He completely read all the movements of his opponent, and handled him while being absolutely safe. And the moment his opponent exposed a big gap, Harold drove in a single strike which became a counter and defeated him.

Harold did not rely on his speed which could even be called as his greatest weapon. This was because of thinking that if he just kept relying only on his speed, someday he might fall into a situation where he could not deal with it using his speed.

Therefore, there was a need for him to improve his combat techniques and at the same time, there was a need for him to make sure how effective his current techniques could be. That was why this enrollment examination was killing 2 birds with 1 stone, but it had the value of 3 birds.

“It’s annoying to deal with each and every one of you separately. While at it, I would not mind even if all of you come simultaneously, alright?”

While feeling sorry for using them for his selfish motives, Harold continued provoking them so that they could fight with all their might.

His mouth that excelled at instigating opponents was in perfect form today too.

◇

“Amazing, that boy …… ..”

Shannon, who was standing next to Vincent, described the spectacle unfolding below her as though she was befuddled. What that simple word ‘amazing’ indicated, was the black-clothed boy that was engaging the members of the chivalric order in a huge scuffle within the training grounds.

Towards that, Vincent only replied with only a small “Yeah”.

Certainly, it was amazing. It could even be called magnificent. The

boy stopped all the attacks precisely no matter what kind and whenever he attacked, he would almost always finish the fight in a single strike. He was dealing with both offense and defense perfectly . A boy who had come to take the enrollment examination and one who was not even 15 years old.

The impression that Shannon expressed was very natural and correct. There was no room to insert an objection.

But because of that perfectness, Vincent was feeling an extraordinarily huge sense of discomfort.

(What is going on? This is too perfect)

The way the boy fought was something one could not do if they did not know their opponent's movements beforehand. It was different from a safe and steady battle.

Because of it flowing too smoothly, one would unintentionally doubt whether it was a sword battle that was arranged beforehand.

This did not simply consist of only predicting the opponent's attacks. He was not simply evading everything aimlessly, but rather was continuing to choose the optimum place to evade or defend while considering the next attack. That itself, if one did not have foresight, they would not be able to eliminate unnecessary movements to that extent and it would be arduous to dish out attacks. One could not help but think that such a person would always "know" 2 to 3 moves ahead.

It was true that there was a fixed style of fighting in the chivalric order. Especially the new recruits that the boy was fighting, that style had been beaten into them as the basics. After learning it, by going through real battles, they would combine it with their own battle style and would continue to optimize it. Vincent himself, although his current style hugely varied when compared to his former style, it was not wrong that that style was the base.

Well, only a small handful of the powerful people in the entire chivalric order had such huge variations. In other words, what he was trying to say was that the boy, who should be an outsider, that

was thoroughly familiar with that style wasn't "amazing", but "strange".

(Right, it's weird. It would be impossible to have such an efficient battle style by only being strong or experienced)

Then how was it that the boy was making the impossible possible. If he were to think about it, there was a possibility that that boy had crossed swords with the Saint King's chivalric order in battlefields. That too, not once or twice, but enough times to memorize their style and swordsmanship, combinations, their timing for using magic and their attributes, and the actions that would become cues for these things.

Even if that were true, it was plenty enough to think that there was a possibility of him belonging to a hostile power. If such a person were to come to take the enrollment examination, then probably, their aim was to conduct some maneuvering activities by infiltrate into the chivalric order.

"…… ..Shannon-Kun, there's something I want you to do."

"Please give any order you want."

"I want you to gather all the battle records of the Saint King's chivalric order within the past 10 years. Everything from large-scale battles to battles with only a single squad and even small scale fights of individual levels."

"When is the due date? If even individual level records of the order's members need to be gathered, then it'll take some time."

"I do not mind. Gather the others while I'm investigating the large-scale battle records"

"Understood."

Shannon respectfully bowed her head. Normally, he would feel like smiling wryly at her politeness, but he was not in the mood for that now.

Predicting activated magic and negating it, they had been

investigated enough for such an absurd thing to be possible. Even habits that they themselves had not noticed might have been discovered. It would be easy to send the boy away by failing him, but that was too dangerous. This was not something that could be ignored.

In that case, they would draw him here and while observing him, try to investigate where he belonged to. There was also the possibility that there existed spies other than him that might have already infiltrated inside the chivalric order or the kingdom. In that case , they could use him to reveal the other spies.

“It’ll be fine if it’s just needless anxiety …….”

“Were you saying something?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s return to work, shall we.”

“Yes.”

While seeing the black-clothed boy take on 20 people, they once again returned back to their paperwork.

Translated by Madao.

Chapter 10

Speaking from the results, Harold magnificently passed the enrollment examination. That was obvious since he had taken on about more than 30 knights and defeated them while he had been almost completely uninjured. Since dealing with movements that did not stick to the characteristic motion would be nothing if one had Harold's reflexes and physical ability, in the latter half, him getting used to it also helped and it was to the extent that he felt as though he was doing some monotonous work. When he realized it, even the high he had felt in a long time had lessened.

But although he passed, there were also problems. It was the fact that although it was an extremely difficult matter, a part of the people could not feel anything good towards the newcomer who had beat up his seniors.

"The newcomer called Harold, is that you?"

"…… So what."

"Since it seems as though you have a huge attitude, we were thinking of teaching you how the newbie should behave."

That is, what he was trying to say was, without even 10 days passing after his enrollment, situations where he would quarrel with senior knights whenever there was any time, started occurring. 'Is it fine for Knight-samas to be like this' , were Harold's frank thoughts. Even with them, who were brave and honorable when seen from outside, it seemed as though not each and everyone was a good person.

That said, thinking how they could do such things so coolly, when he questioned Shido about it, it seemed as though personal fights using weapons or magic were prohibited. And it also seemed as though a considerably heavy penalty would be given if one broke the ban. That was why they attacked with their bare hands. And obviously, they attacked Harold aiming for when he was unarmed too. It seemed as though it was done under the pretense of unarmed combat training and not personal struggles without weapons.

After doing the laundry which was assigned to the newcomers and drying them, in front of Harold, who was returning to the barracks, were 4 senior knights standing shoulder to shoulder. Harold openly breathed out a sigh. He did not care if that attitude conversely instigated them even more. For them, no matter what Harold did, it would get on their nerves. 'If a person is detestable, then even their clothing is detestable', was a saying that was well said. Even if they were to thrash Harold, they would probably still be unable to stand him.

If so, it would not be alright to simply get beaten up. If he could not avoid being hated then he was fine with leaving it like that. Frankly speaking, it was meaningless to simply keep them company. There was only a single action that Harold could pick here.

Bending both his knees by a little, he dropped his center of gravity. Looking at the posture where it seemed as though he would throw himself upon them even now, the four of them increased their vigilance, but that backfired. Unleashing the strength stored in his legs, Harold's figure disappeared leaving behind a 'whoosh' sound of cutting through the air. Due to their visions narrowing because they were too concentrated on Harold in close-range, their eyes were not able to keep up with that speed. As a result, they were late in reacting.

By the time they became aware that Harold had disappeared, he had already kicked the stone wall present on the right side and had accelerated towards the front. With that action that did not even take a single second, he had left behind the 4 of them and instantly opened a gap of more than 20 meters. With this, there was nothing the 4 of them could do to catch up to him. By the time they turned back, Harold's back had already become distant.

Ignoring the angry "Wait!" S that could be heard from behind, he headed towards a busy place. Because if there were some people, it would be hard for even them to start a quarrel. If he just let it go like this, it would end without needing to take them on.

(At any rate, if there are a huge amount of people like those guys, then even Vincent wont 'be repaid, huh)

While steadily pulling away, Harold was thinking about such things. Although Vincent was a person who would become a powerful enemy in the game, he himself was a good person at heart. As a human, as a knight, his personality was to always be righteous.

“Knights are the sword of the Kingdom and also its shield”

That was his belief, but what Vincent was trying to protect was not just the King. According to him, a Kingdom was all its citizens.

Borrowing the lines from the narrative –

“A nation exists only because of it’s citizens. If there is no nation, then there is no need for a King. That is why, leading the nation and creating a bond (means) of peace for the citizens is the duty of the King . In that case, so that both parties fulfill their own duties, us knights are the ones that eliminate the threats that attack them and the ones that open up the future of the nation! “

Vincent was a man who honored justice, valued etiquette, saved the weak, remonstrated the ones who were wrong and mercilessly slayed the ones that would harm the citizens.

Without a mistake, he was righteous. And he was strong enough to also assert and put that righteousness into practice. Although, it could also be said that he was like that because he had compelled himself thinking that it would not do if he weren ‘t like that. As a result, after the game’s Vincent had stuck to his beliefs, he had been crushed by his own ideals and his heart had broken.

Although the topic had digressed a bit, to put it simply, picking on others in the name of training that stuck inside the chivalric order like some bad tradition, was very far apart from the ideal knights and the state of organization that Vincent wished for. There was no way he would forgive these kinds of things, and he would most probably completely eradicate it once he became the Captain.

Thinking, ‘I’d be happy if he could do so as fast as possible’, as though it were other people’s affairs, without slowing down, he managed to run away. The time was already past noon. While thinking of having lunch, he returned the wicker basket used for

laundry to the barracks and went towards the grand mess room. If it was there, since there would be many people at this period of time, they would not blatantly try to quarrel with him.

This was a completely digressing topic, but the dishes in the basic menu in the grand mess room was free of charge. In the case of high grade dishes or when a side menu was supplemented, it would generate some money but it was not a considerable amount.

With the meals being neither too much nor too less, Harold, who was not picky, innocuously ordered the basic menu and quickly sat down in an empty seat. And naturally, he was eating alone.

Harold, who frequently quarreled, was obviously avoided by his seniors and also by the other newcomers. Although they were called newcomers, there was certainly some kind of wall due to there being a difference in the time and circumstances when they had joined, but the primary reason was still that Harold would get caught up in a quarrel every single time. Since they were afraid of getting involved if they were with him, it could not be helped that they were hesitant to get close to him.

“Scowling today too, huh, Harold”

That said, there were always exceptions no matter what the situation. There was a man who sat in the empty seat right next to him. It was Shido. And as though they were being lead by him, both Robinson and Aileen sat down opposite Harold .

“What do you want?”

“Since there was a sad junior who was eating alone, the senior whose heart was aching thought of sharing the table with him.”

“That’s an unneeded favor. In the first place, even you do not have any good friends, do you? I have not seen you with anyone other than these guys.”

“Do not be ridiculous. I’m not Robin”

“I wish you would not say something I can not deny …… ..”

Being suddenly hit by a stray bullet, Robinson became depressed. That figure of him mixing his soup with a spoon while hunching his shoulders was like a timid child.

Frequently meeting him since after coming here, even Harold had understood that the youth with this face and big stature called Robinson, contrary to his appearance, was timid and delicate, and on top of that had a quiet temperament. His appearance and insides were completely opposite.

And so, there was no need to fear him, but still it would take some time to get completely used to him. If he were suddenly appear in his vision, Harold would reflexively freeze up.

“By the way, you’ve become quite popular. Must be difficult to keep the seniors company”

Shido lowered his tone by a little and said that. It seemed like there were people who did not think well of Harold in his surroundings too. Looking at how he was interacting in a friendly manner like this without getting influenced by them showed that Shido was a good person. Even Robinson and Aileen were looking at Harold with their eyes filled with concern.

“…… .Certainly. Right now, I’m being surrounded by troublesome guys.”

“If you can say that much, you seem to be fine.”

Without even making an unpleasant face at those harsh words, Shido laughed loudly. In contrast to that, Aileen breathed out a sigh.

“Good grief, you’re not adorable to an unbelievable extent. If you’re like that, you will not be able to make any friends or find a lover.”

“Buhahaha! You say lover, but you’re the last person who should say that!”

“Did you say anything? Shido”

Before Shido could finish his sentence, Aileen’s left straight burst

forth. The thing that captured that fist was Shido's face. Shido, who had asked for the fist that had been swung without any mercy, had a red line flowing out from his nose.

"Ha, unfortunately I do not need such things."

"Well, that's right."

The moment he replied back to Aileen who was emitting an intimidating air, appearing out of nowhere, Cody put his hand on Harold's right shoulder. That face had its usual faint smile. Maybe because the other 3 were used to him appearing in this manner, they did not show any great reactions. Although even Harold was not much different from them on the surface, inwardly, his heart was pounding.

"Since Harold-kun already has a fiancee. There's no need for him to make a girlfriend now, right ～"

Without even any special warning, Cody casually dropped a bomb. Due to being completely surprised, Harold was not able to react immediately. On the contrary, he committed a fatal error.

"…… .Why Do you know that?"

He ended up asking that question. With this, it became as though he was affirming that Cody's statement was true.While clumsily wiping the red liquid dripping down from his nose with his cuffs, Shido grasped Harold's open left shoulder.

"Let us hear it in detail, Harold. It seems as though you have a fiancee?"

"Right, right. Graceful and elegant, a very lovely girl to whom the words 'Refined young lady' suit perfectly"

Towards the question asked by Shido, who was drawing closer, for some reason, the one who answered was Cody. Although that too was irritating, more than anything, the problem was the way he spoke, as though he clearly knew about Erika.

"Oi, why do you know about her-"

“Her? Did you just say her? At that age, you’re already acting like a husband !?”

“Eei, do not scream, it’s annoying!”

“Well then, I’ll return to my work. You guys, keep the clamoring within limits.”

While he was having a hard time tearing off Shido, who was clinging to him asking for the details, the source that invited the clamor left while waving his hand languidly.

But there was no way this place would settle down with only that, and he was stuck dealing with Shido who was shouting, “It’d be fine if it were a girlfriend, but a fiancee!”, And a shocked Aileen who was saying “To lose to a younger guy and that too, to one who is so unsociable like this …… ..”. Robinson was nothing but flustered trying to pacify the 2 who were like that.

It was quite a noisy noon.

◇

More than half the members lived within the barracks that dotted the chivalric order’s headquarters. As a general rule, until a few years from enrollment, it was a cramped condition with 6 people in a room, but the treatment would gradually change depending on the years of service or the post as it would become 3 in a room or 2 in room. On the other hand, the people who had a family could live in their own house, and if one were to fulfill the established criteria, it would be possible for them to move out of the barracks even if they were single. The only thing that was absolute was that it was a necessity for one to live in the barracks with others for a minimum of 4 years from enrollment.

That being the case, if one were to become the Vice Captain of the chivalric order, they would be given a completely private room. Accurately speaking, they would be given an exclusive office that would act as a joint establishment of their residence, study and reception room.

As far as Vincent was concerned, it was something that was too much for him, but a space where one could live without minding the surrounding people was a well appreciated thing.

That was why, when Cody, who was an old friend, stepped into this place, his usual lax attitude grew worse. Since the need to mind each other's position completely disappeared. Even now, he had completely occupied the 3 seater sofa in the reception room by lying down face up on it. He had his knees raised and legs crossed, and while using his left arm as a pillow, he continued reading a report held in his right hand while skillfully turning the pages with only one hand.

“Hmm, from about 3 years ago, he applied to and participated in the subjugation expeditions, huh.”

The report in Cody’s hand contained all the information regarding Harold. But it was still just limited to the information obtainable from the outside though.

The reason why he knew about Erika was also because of the fact that in a previous investigation report, she had been named as his

fiancee and even her portrait had been placed. That too was also one part of the information that Vincent had asked to be gathered regarding Harold. After looking through it, Cody rose up and asked Vincent, the one who gave him this, of his real intentions.

“So then, what are you telling me to do by making me read this?”

“Soon, I’ll put Harold in your squad. I’m sharing this information because of that.”

“Oioi, it still has not even been a month since Harold enrolled, has it? Normally, enlistment is only after clearing the basic training curriculum, right?”

“I’ve judged that is is unnecessary. Just in case, I’ll have him take up the final examination of the basic training curriculum, but if it’s him, he will probably be fine.”

“That is, well, you’re right. But still, it’s an exception among exceptions.”

“Harold is outstanding. Due to that, there’s no need to stick to the norm and a suitable training must be given. In the first place, since he has enrolled at an age of only 13 years and as the youngest person in history, no matter what is done, it will not change the fact that he will gather attention “

“The thing called following experience? But he’ll stand out. More than presently.”

“That is why I want you to become his windbreak”

For a short while, both their gazes collided. But even that did not last long, and Cody, who was the first to avert his gaze, breathed out a long sigh.

“I understand what you are saying- the superficial reason.”

“…… You’ve seen through my thinking, huh.”

“It’s not particularly to that extent. But if it were only for that reason, there would be no need to do this much, right?”

Saying that, he flung the report in his right hand on top of the desk. Cody's point was rational. And right from the start, Vincent had no intentions to hide his plan from Cody. It was only a conversation for formalities sake up until now , and the real issue was from here on.

"Say, Cody, looking at the way Harold fought during the enrollment exam, what did you think?"

"…… ..Needless To say," Impossible ", was what I felt. No matter what, him being able to move in that kind of way, where the countermeasures against the chivalric order was optimized enough for it to be conveniently done, I was outside my expectations. "

It seemed as though he too had hit upon the same doubt like Vincent. That was how inexplicable the movements that Harold had shown were.

"Even I agree. There is a need to investigate where he learned a fighting style like that."

"But Harold is a full-fledged noble, you know? That too, he's one of those stiff pure-blood faction that are rare these days."

Seeing through Vincent's thoughts, where he was having apprehensions that Harold had connections with organizations that were hostile towards this nation, Cody talked as though telling him to calm down.

"As a result, he might've killed a servant's family."

"Ah, I can not deny that …… but there were things like how he had been injured due to protecting soldiers, so you can not just simply judge him like that, right?"

"For the sake of making sure of that is also another reason for his immediate enlistment. There is a need to check his background and personality. These are jobs that I can ask only of you."

"In other words, you want me to monitor him, huh. I doubt that there is a need to do things to such an extent though."

"I can not just imprudently believe in him just because he is a

noble. We have experienced that firsthand 10 years ago with Noheik's treachery."

"… .."

Towards Vincent's words, Cody could not help but be silent. He did not even want to remember it, the betrayal of the one who was even called as the King's confidant, Kalem Noheik.

Kalem, who had also been the head of the historic house of Noheik, had leaked highly classified information and had received a large amount of money from the company he had been colluding with. Even the fingers of both hands were not enough to count his charges. And among them, leaking information regarding the Saint King's chivalric order had also been included.

Kalem, who had been imprisoned, had not given a testimony with regards to the incident and had committed suicide by banging his head a number of times against the wall. As a result, the incident had ended with the company he had colluded with being penalized, and even until now, they had not been able to properly grasp where and how much of the classified information had leaked out.

Kalem's betrayal and death had given a greater shock than due to the damage suffered by the nation because starting with the King, he had obtained the trust of his colleagues and even the masses.

"Besides, I have not thought that that incident has been resolved. The negative inheritance he left behind, the people who conspired with Noheik in those days, are still lurking behind the center of the nation."

"…… If you are going to this extent, then it seems as though you've grasped something. And so, you are saying that those guys might be there behind Harold, huh."

"Or, there might also be a possibility that there is a third party that obtained the information that Noheik leaked, but in either case, we can only just speculate. I do feel sorry for you and Harold. But still-"

“Understood. Alright, I’ll do it.”

The words, ‘I have to doubt him’, were overwritten by Cody.

“…… .Sorry”

“Why is it that you are apologizing here. It’s fine to say thank you or something. You are too earnest, much more than required.”

“Because the guy who was always next to me did nothing but slack off. I might have become serious for his portion too. Even now, if he were to change his mind a little, it would be helpful.”

“Oh, my ears hurt. Disperse, disperse”

Cody hunched his shoulders, stood up, and left the reception room in a hurry. Looking at the door, which had been closed with a snap, that seemed to have been superimposed by his old friend’s back, even though he knew it would not reach, Vincent spoke out a word of gratitude. Only a single “Thank you”.

Translated by Madao.

Chapter 11

That day, a particular barrack for newcomers in one corner of the headquarters of the Saint King's chivalric order was engrossed in a certain topic. The origin of the matter was the notification sent to the whole of the chivalric order a few days back. The contents were that a new person that had enlisted would come. Although enlistments that happened in the middle, without going through the open recruitment examination conducted every year, were certainly less, there was no need to make any special fuss about it.

Then the reason as to why it had become a hot topic was because the age of the one who had enlisted in the middle was far below the originally stipulated age. Since it was a boy of 13 years old. It was the enlistment of the youngest person since the establishment of the chivalric order. That itself wasn't a lacking subject, but since he had single-handedly defeated a few dozen senior knights during the enlistment examination, their curiosity about exactly what kind of person he was, was never-ending.

The newcomers of the same term who filled the barracks of the 94th term were especially noisy. The ones who were the most noisy were the members of the 7th squad of the 94th term who were to live together with the boy.

「Say, if that newbie is a guy like in the rumors, what to do?」

The leader of the 7th squad, Isaac, while fidgeting nervously, asked that question to his squad members.

「That again? The contents of the rumor are all unbelievable, and I think that it is a bit too far-fetched…….」

「But it seems the part about him beating up many of the seniors is true, so at the very least, he might not be ordinary」

「A brawny guy with a height of more than 2 meters and he clobbers his opponents without even using any weapons while none of the attacks work on him……. was it? I don't have the confidence to work with a monster like that」

「Actually, there are people who believe that he is a ghost formed from the collective grudge of the knights who died on the battlefield. That's why attacks don't work, it seems」

「Impossible…….. right?」

The words that were successively coming out of their mouths were the indication of anxiety they were feeling. This was because from the past few days, the rumors regarding the newbie were too unreal. The contents were things that should have been laughed off, but they couldn't do so because there was some authenticity. But the things like him being a ghost were too crazy.

Therefore, lately whenever they were free they would express their respective speculations, about how he was like this or that, about the identity of the newbie. But that too would end today. Since the newbie, who was the center of topic, was going to come here today.

At that time, suddenly, without even a knock, the doorknob was pulled. The four's gazes simultaneously concentrated on the door. While raising an old-fashioned creaking sound, the door gradually opened. And then, the one who appeared from the other side was–

「Excuse me for a bit. Are all of you here?」

It was a man with unkempt hair, which extended until the nape of his neck, and an unshaven beard. They didn't know about the man since it had only been a few months since their enlistment, but recognizing that he was a superior officer by looking at the arm band on his shoulder, they took a posture of saluting him.

「Yeah, yeah, good work. I've only just brought the thing to be delivered, so I'll leave the rest to you guys」

From behind the superior officer who stated that in a very careless manner, a boy with a height of about 160 cm showed his face. His expression was grim.

「You have quite the guts to treat me like an object, huh, Cody. Should I stuff you in a wine barrel and kick you out into the sea?」

When they were thinking that he might be nervous, without even

hesitating, the boy abused the superior officer all of a sudden. With a spectacle which they hadn't predicted at all in front of them, starting from Isaac, the other 4 froze up with their mouths gaping widely. Not only had the newbie, who had just enlisted, not used honorifics in front the superior officer, but had actually spoke in this manner. It couldn't simply be settled with reasons like just because he was a child or because had some backing. It was a behavior that was very far apart from their common sense.

「At that time, I wish you fill barrel completely with alcohol too. With something I'm not able to drink usually, like Cognac」

「Be satisfied with low-class ale. It's fit for you」

「That's quite a cheap brand. There's no way I can have low-class ale for the last drink in my life」

But even the superior officer behaved as though he didn't mind it. Rather, he was even grinning broadly. While they were standing there with their heads still unable to process this abnormal situation, the superior officer left with a 「Later」 while swinging his hand. Thereupon, naturally, only the boy, who was brought by him, was left in front of them.

He wasn't a brawny 2 m man like in the rumors. His noble features, compared to his age, gave off a somewhat grown-up impression, but it also gave off an immature impression suitable for his age. Black hair and clothes, and those crimson eyes that seemed as though it would suck in those who looked at them. Those eyes suddenly narrowed, and a sharp look captured the four.

「I'm Harold. You bastards, pay the utmost attention so that you don't displease me」

As though it were natural, and also concise enough for one to unintentionally miss it, the boy who named himself Harold declared that. He was beyond cheeky, almost outrageous. Although they were contemporaries, as seniors normally they should have shown their anger, but when it was so outrageous, they could only be taken aback.

「…….. Um, okay. I'm Isaac. Pleased to meet you」

Isaac, who somehow responded even while being dumbfounded, could barely respond like that in an very polite way with a cramped smile. There was no one who looked at that figure as being pathetic for acting like that in front of a boy younger than him.
All of them were overwhelmed by that intense presence Harold held, not allowing them to say no. If one were to say pathetic, then without a doubt all of them were. This was, for the members of the 7th squad of the 94th term, their chance meeting with Harold, one they would never forget in their lives.

◇

Maybe because Harold was silent originally, after that, he only spoke for the minimum required amount. It was also because Isaac and the others couldn't speak to the silent Harold due to hesitating. They welcomed the next day with that atmosphere that seemed to choke them. During the early morning, when the mist still hung in the air, including the 7th squad, all new recruits that had been enlisted for less than a year were gathered at the outdoor training field. It was normal, the usual morning drill.

If something were different, then it was that Harold's introduction had been inserted before the start.

「Even you guys would have heard the talks, but this guy is the youngest in history to enlist, Harold Stokes」

Due to those few words from the instructor, murmurs spread about among the new recruits. Most probably, it was because he could only be seen as a normal boy unlike the man in the rumors. Almost all whispers were skeptical ones, doubting whether he was actually strong. Maybe because Harold, who was standing next to the instructor, hadn't heard those whispers, he didn't even bat an eye.

「As long as one has enlisted, age doesn't matter. Everybody are treated equally. Harold, are you prepared for that?」

「Don't ask foolish questions. Being treated equal to these guys is too lukewarm」

「It seems that it's true that you don't know how to speak. You can participate only after running around the training field 30 times! Go!」

Listening the instructors words, everybody were startled. Morning training was first warm-up exercises along with running 10 laps around the training ground, and after that working the body and practice swings. It wasn't rare that people were punished by being made to run extra laps around the field if they were judged to be late or slacking off. But still, it was rare for someone to be punished with 30 extra laps. It was the first time the recruits of the 94th term had heard this number in the less than half a year they had been enlisted. It seemed as though Harold's behavior had irritated the instructor considerably. Being handed the punishment, Harold started running without talking back. Immediately after that, the instructor raised his voice once again.

「What are you guys doing! Do you guys also want to run the same amount as him!? If not, start running immediately!」

Being driven by that voice, everybody simultaneously started running thinking, 'Please spare us from that'. 1 lap of the training ground was about 400 m. For 30 laps, it was about 12km. Even for them, it would take about about 50 minutes. For people around Harold's age, it would take more than an hour. It was unthinkable that he would have the energy remaining to participate in the training after finishing that.

He might drop out on the first day itself. Everybody thought so. But as they entered their 2nd lap, they noticed that something was strange. The gap between them and Harold, who was leading, hadn't decreased at all. On the contrary, it gradually became wider.

「No matter how you look at it, he's going too fast」

「If he's like that, he won't be able to hold up until 30 laps」

Some of the people who were running next to Isaac gave their frank impressions. Everybody thought that that was right.* But against those expectations, when they were in their 5th lap, Harold had left them behind by so much that they had fallen behind by 1 lap. But

still, his pace hadn't dropped.
Well-regulated breathing, steady body, hands and legs that were being moved strongly. That nimble running of his was far from his limits which made them feel as though he even had some leeway.

They couldn't believe it. If they were running at the same pace as Harold was, their breath would have most probably been faint by now. Harold glanced behind, and as though he was thinking, after a moment, he muttered to nobody in particular.

「Shall I raise the pace a bit more」

The once that picked that up shuddered, thinking, 'He'll go even faster?'. Instantly, Harold's strides became larger. Proportionally, Harold steadily accelerated.

Almost simultaneously, their legs suddenly became heavier. The degree of fatigue they normally felt towards the end of morning training had already been accumulated at this point.
'Why?'- This question rose, but was immediately cleared. Lured by Harold, even their paces had increased. Even their breath had started rising. Remaining 4 laps. Just becoming conscious of that was painful enough to almost stop their legs.

Due to their pace being disrupted, by the time they finally completed 10 laps, they were 5 minutes late compared to their usual time. Despite that, their fatigue was heavy. But the most surprising thing was, a few minutes after they had finished running, Harold completed his 30 laps. With an astounding speed. Even the instructor was making a face as though he was seeing something unbelievable. And Harold, even while sweating, hadn't broken that refreshing look on his face.

「…… It seems you have considerable stamina」

「Naturally. I haven't done training weak enough to be exhausted by this level」

「Hou. Then for the form practice next, I'll have you swing this」

Maybe thinking that the punishment wasn't enough seeing that

Harold's haughty manner of speaking still hadn't reduced, the instructor handed Harold a lengthy sword that wasn't normally used for form practice. Since the blade was long, due to its weight and the centrifugal force it would produce, handling it would become extremely difficult. With that body where his frame and muscles still hadn't developed, just swinging it properly would be difficult.

But that was only common sense. Including the instructor, everybody that were present here were starting to vaguely sense that Harold was an exception that didn't adhere to that kind of common sense. Maybe paying attention to the others, Harold took some distance from them after accepting the longsword, and probably wanting to confirm the sword's center of gravity and the burden it would give off, he swung it freely as he pleased. The way he freely handled the sword looked as though it was a dance.

It was at that time. A gust of wind blew. It wasn't strong enough to be called a gale, but it shook the trees and scattered their leaves. The green leaves in midair were led by the wind and flowed towards Harold. The moment the green leaves passed in front of his eyes, Harold unleashed multiple sword slashes. Since the speed was astounding, to Isaac, the sword seemed blurred and he could only see afterimages. Most probably, it was the same for the others too.

It was obvious that Harold's action of that wanting to cut the scattering leaves. 'Is that even possible?', were their frank thoughts. To cut the irregularly moving leaves that get blown away by the sword's wind pressure would demand extraordinary skill and kinetic vision.

But Harold was the type that could actually execute it. 6 leaves which were slashed by sword, tore. Cut vertically and horizontally like a cross, they became 24 pieces. The leaves that were cut were blown away by the wind and disappeared towards the horizon. Without paying any attention to them, who were watching that in a daze, Harold stared at the longsword seriously.

「Humph, not bad」

He was just trying out the sword. It was only a trial, and it was

natural that he could do it. Harold's attitude indicated that.

Including the longsword, the blades of all weapons that were generally classified as swords were heavy. Cutting leaves fluttering in midair like before was difficult. If it were to be done, then only the part of the sharp tapered point, of a few mm, used to pierce opponents should be used.

Only the point of the hard to wield and heavy longsword could accurately cut an object with irregular movement which was literally light enough to be blown by the wind and limp enough for its shape to easily change. If the slashes missed by even a single mm, if the gap was different by even a single hair's width- it was a move that couldn't be accomplished if even just slight differences like these occurred.

How high was Harold's ability if he could easily accomplish such a thing. The rumors that they had heard about how he easily overpowered a few dozen senior knights were most probably true.

Every single person in the 94th term understood. Harold was at a level where they couldn't possibly reach. They realized it instinctively. It was close to the momentary instinct a wild animal held against its natural enemy. An absolute rank as though it were already determined at the time of their birth.

2 days after enlisting, Harold seized every single person of the 94th term by showing his overwhelming ability.

Chapter 12

Waking up at sunrise, the new recruits would do the morning training for about 2 hours. After breakfast, they would do miscellaneous jobs within the chivalric order, and depending on the situation, they would patrol around the city following behind their seniors like ducklings. And after lunch, they would do nothing but train. When it was actually done, it was quite a hard schedule.

It had already been more than about 2 weeks since he had continued this lifestyle, but there had been no changes with Harold. This was true for both himself and his surroundings. To start with, with regards to either stamina or ability in training, he had no troubles. No matter how much he moved, his stamina limit wasn't found, and he could finish any training no matter what it was.

On the other hand, due to his mouth that continued to throw out rash remarks towards his superior officer as though he had no idea about the concept of TPO, it was troublesome since supplements kept on being added to his training menu. Although he had a body that could easily complete the increased training, thinking about how the instructor's impression about him was crawling on the ground, he was fearful everyday thinking that he might be asked to leave before long.

It was as usual with his surroundings, where he was avoided by his contemporaries and was always getting caught up with the anti-Harold force. By the way, he didn't know much about his roommates. This was because he was always training during his free time due to not being able to stand the silence in the room. It had completely changed into a room that he used only for sleeping. That is, other than his human relations being in a devastating condition, there were no particular fatal troubles for now.

And so, today, when he was going to find lunch in preparation for the afternoon training, he was abruptly called to the instructor's room. When Harold, filled with trepidation, went towards the instructor's room thinking, 'No way, am I really going to be dismissed?', without any preface, the instructor informed him.

「Harold, you'll take the final examination of the basic training course」

「The final examination?」

「That's right. If you succeed, you'll openly graduate from a new recruit and be enlisted」

Thinking, 'Come to think of it, there was something like that in the code which consolidates the rules of the chivalric order', he dug through his hazy memories. If that memory was correct, then only those who had enlisted for more than 1 year were qualified to take up the final examination of the basic training course.

「I thought that it still hasn't even been a month since I've enlisted though? It seems as though the flow of time is different here」

「It's an exceptional case this time. It has been judged that your strength has already far surpassed the limits of the new recruits」

「That was already known at the time of the enrollment examination. Well, I'll praise you for your judgment to make an exceptional case」

Even towards his superior officer, he spoke in a condescending manner as though it were natural. For Harold, he couldn't help but think that it was mystery as to why they still hadn't chased him out with that crazy attitude of his. And he was also surprised at the sudden final examination. But he had no hesitation about taking it.

The original work's Harold's official post was unknown, but thinking about he would sometimes bring his subordinates along, it could be guessed that he had some high position. Harold himself had no interest in position, but he would lose nothing if he could move around freely to some extent.

「The final examination is in a few days. The content will be informed on the day of the exam, but make your preparations for going on an expedition」

「Is that all?」

「Yeah, that's it. Wish you good luck」

「There's no use in wishing. Because the result is obvious」

Towards the instructor's encouragement, he didn't even honestly say, 「I'll do my best」. With this, if he were to fail, he would become a laughingstock. Harold renewed his conviction to at least strive to be sincere in his actions.
4 days after that. Quickly, the day of the final examination arrived.

While donning the noisy armor that also symbolized the chivalric order, he proceeded step by step. Bathed in the sunlight that was coming from the sun that was almost directly overhead, there were 9 shadows. It was a composition of Harold and the 4 from Cody's squad, 2 platoon leaders, a company commander and his aide.

If the contents of the examination were to be summarized, it was field training. Currently, they were in the middle of marching towards their destination. This too was a part of the training, and they had roughly continued walking for about 3 hours.

「How is it Harold, are you starting to get tired?」

While he was silently moving his legs forward, a voice came from behind. Rather than worry, that tone contained intentions of teasing him. Shido, who was the owner of that voice, didn't appear to be tired.

「If I look like that to you, then go see a doctor. But it might already be too late」

「Aren't you quite composed? As expected of having participated in subjugation expeditions in your territory」

「…… Why do you know that? It was the same last time too」

「Last time? What are you talking about?」

「Don't play dumb. You knew about Erika」

「Ah, Harold-kun's fiancee」

Cody emphasized the fiancee part. Harold had dug his own grave. It was foolish of him to bring that up. Feeling suspicious about Cody having obtained information about him for some reason, Harold, being in a disadvantageous situation with Cody at the front and Shido at the back, kept silent. It was the so-called tactical retreat. However, he received a pursuit from an unexpected direction.

「That's interesting. Does Stokes-kun have a fiancee?」

It was the side-part haired company commander, Sakrith[1], to whom suit seemed to be more suitable than armor. Behind that elite bureaucrat appearance, maybe he liked this kind of topic. And due to Sakrith leading on the topic, everybody's gazes concentrated on Harold. Frankly speaking, he was used to this, but still, he wouldn't feel right if he just ignored him.

「……..Yes, so?」

Without being able to deny it by saying it was just a front, the instant he answered, the tension shot up. Especially the aide, whose face immediately stiffened. As expected, talking informally with a company commander might not have been permitted. Resigning himself to just accept the admonishment here, he prepared himself and waited for the shouting. But, what came back was a faint wavering voice filled with sorrow.

「Is that so, is that so…….. Even a boy 20 years younger has a fiancee, but when it comes to me……」

Sakrith started mumbling something. Cody and the 2 platoon leaders were peeking at that situation, where the aide was trying to cheer him up with a 「It'll be alright!」, while trying to stifle their laughter. It seemed as though the fault wasn't his disrespectful attitude, but that he had stepped on Sakrith's landmine. While thinking of how the members of the chivalric order who didn't have lovers seemed to have the same reaction, Harold glanced at Aileen.

「I'll destroy you」

The moment their eyes met, he was warned so. He wasn't sure as to what she would destroy, but she was being quite unreasonable. It

was a behavior where he could understand why she didn't have a boyfriend. No matter which part of the body, since it would be unbearable to have it destroyed, he turned forward and concentrated on walking. But that too was interrupted soon.

「2 Hammer Treants! They are approaching in this direction!」

Robinson raised his voice. When they looked, trees of about 5 m tall were using 2 branches about as thick as their trunks like crutches and were drawing nearer. Naturally, they weren't normal vegetation.

Hammer Treant was a monster in the shape of a tree. The huge branches that were used for movement were also swung around like cudgels to destroy their opponents, defense and all, which was why they were prefixed with the word Hammer. Since there were things like eyes and mouth on their trunks, they were also called human-faced trees. Without a doubt, they were vegetation, but it was possible for them to predate on animals using their mouths and turn them into nourishment. There were no exceptions even when humans were their opponents.

「Hmm, it seems that we are the targets」

「Since there are still a bit distant, we could get away, but if they were to go down the hill behind us, the highway is there」

「Then we should bring them down here itself. Stokes-kun, you–」

「Don't ask me to step back, alright?」

Harold declared his intention to fight while interrupting him.

「Running into Hammer Treants was unexpected. It won't have any influence on the examination's results」

(It won't!?)

Thinking that since this was field training, dealing with unexpected situations like this was also a part of the examination, and deciding to go all out, backfired. That said, it wouldn't look good if he were to withdraw now. And also, Harold still held a grudge against

Hammer Treants for putting a crack his ribs. It was just right for a revenge match.

「Like I give a damn about the points. That one is mine」

「……..Understood. Just in case, I'm sending Lukas and Selim to support. Don't force yourself」

With Sakrith's order, they split up in 2 directions with Harold and the 2 platoon leaders in one and the rest of them in the other. The Hammer Treants were also lured by those movements and split up. It was a chance to crush each and every person.

「We'll be behind you. You can fight without any worries」

「I'm looking forward to seeing that rumored strength of yours. But as soon as you find it dangerous, immediately fall back, alright? Originally, that is a very pressing opponent for new recruits」

Lukas and Selim encouraged Harold by patting his back. They were extremely reliable seniors.

(Come to think of it, these people have no hostility towards me. That itself helps me)

But the person himself had enough complacency to think about such things. Although he called it a revenge match, he felt no particular emotion. Even during that day when he was injured, if he hadn't tried to protect the soldier, it would have been an opponent that he could have defeated without much trouble. Much less when it was an unexpected situation that occurred during the examination. He wanted to defeat it quickly without needlessly wasting any time.

Without even drawing his sword, he walked towards it with unfaltering footsteps as though he was taking a stroll. In contrast with him, the Hammer Treant switched to attacking. It raised it's right branch– hammer, and struck down towards Harold. 'Dogoon!'- with a heavily destructive sound, a cloud of dust rose up and the ground shook. Harold evaded that attack by leaping up.

But with him floating in midair, he became the perfect target. In a

flash, the left hammer attacked Harold. It was a timing at which he couldn't avoid a direct hit. But Harold did a quick spin in midair, and with his right leg clad in something that looked like a violet aura, he kicked the attacking hammer down.

『Artillery kick』[2]
Similar to Heavy Palm Knock, it was a heavy strike technique in unarmed combat. It was a kicking skill also called as 『Axe kick』 among the players. Originally, artillery kick was a skill that was inserted in the middle of a combo, but differing from Heavy Palm Knock, its power was reasonably high even when it was used on its own. But still, since the attack's reach was short, it wasn't used much on its own. By the way, he didn't quite know what the violet effect that was generated like in the game was, but since it naturally appeared even when he thought it wouldn't, he just convinced himself that it was something like that.

The Hammer Treant's hard branch and Harold's right leg clashed. It was a collision of Harold, who weighed about 50 kg, and the Hammer Treant that weighed about a few hundred kg. The level of the masses were too different, and normally thinking, the lighter one would be blown away. But even accepting that, the original work's characters were existences that their opponents would feel as though they would bring about results that were to the extent of being called irrational.

The moment they clashed, a shrill sound resounded. The one that was defeated was the Hammer Treant. Not only that, but with a thud, the edge of the branch was buried in the ground. The hammer was crushed, and at the part that had been kicked, the bark was ripped off.

Lukas and Selim were looking at that scene in a daze. Even the others that had been fighting the other Hammer Treant were gaping at this scene, but for now they gave higher priority to bringing it down. Using the buried hammer as a foothold, Harold approached the trunk, and after finally removing his sword from the scabbard, he stabbed it deep into the Hammer Treant's mouth. And then, without even giving the it the time to cry out in pain, Harold ended the fight.

「『Flame Sword』」

Flames erupted from the sword that Harold was gripping. But the pain of its insides being burned directly, for the Hammer Treant, it lasted only for an instant. Harold cut straight upwards with the sword still thrust in its mouth. Due to that, the Hammer Treant was cut right in half from the inside by the flaming sword, and was burned to death.

The close to 5 m tall body separated into 2 parts, and in the blink of an eye, it was wrapped in flames. While blazing, the Hammer Treant fell down to the ground. It was a battle that didn't even last a single minute. The fight was literally an instant-kill.

TL-
1. The name is サクリス(Sakurisu)
2. The kanji -鳳仙脚. And also in furigana -ほうせんきゃく (Housenkyaku)

Chapter 13

Without coming across any large-scale monsters after encountering the Hammer Treants and without any particular problems arising, the field training continued without any delay. A large part of the final examination was combating monsters. And the monsters that were to be fought against were already decided beforehand while taking the new recruits' strength into consideration. Mainly, it was from small-scale monsters that could be defeated individually to mid-scale monsters that could be defeated using coordination.

But there was no way they could conveniently encounter the monsters that they were aiming for, and in those cases, it was not rare to camp around the living habitat of these monsters for a few days. Therein, not only combat ability, but also stamina, resilience and also the ability to coordinate with comrades were observed. This time, since only Harold had appeared for the final examination as an exceptional case, although the progress rate was considerably fine, it was unavoidable that it would take some time while they were on alert or when they were searching for monsters.

Eventually, the final examination completely ended only after 3 days from its start. At the end, by the time the Basilisk had been defeated, it had already grown dark. While Harold and the others were making preparations to set up camp on the riverside, Sakrith looked back on events that had occurred in these 3 days.

The basic training curriculum's final examination held in a hurry with its only participant being the boy of hot-topic, Harold.

There was the fact that his age was only 13 years, but the most surprising thing was the fight against the Hammer Treant. If only new recruits had to defeat large-scale monsters like that, it would be difficult if more than 4 of them didn 't fight together.

That was why Sakrith had sent the platoon leaders Lukas and Selim as support, but Harold had easily defeated the Hammer Treant without borrowing their strength. He could declare that even for him, it would be impossible to slaughter a Hammer Treant at that speed. An absurdly high combat ability. He was made to realize

what kind of people those outstanding talents that could carve their names in the history of the chivalric order were.

Since Harold had so much strength at this age itself, it might be obvious that it was the cause for his arrogance. Sakrith thought that this was the cause for his overflowing confidence, snappy attitude, and his words which disdained people.

But looking at it the other way, it could be tied to selfishly taking independent action. Because the more one was like Harold, who were confident in their strength, the more they tended to disdain cooperating with their comrades. No matter how strong one was , there were limits to what they they could do alone. Getting worked up thinking, 'If he is not able to understand that, he will not be able to pass so easily', was only for a short while.

When the time came for him to cooperate with Cody's squad, he handled it without any flaws. At first, there were parts where their coordination was not smooth, but as the number of times they did it increased, those parts also improved. And when it was the 3rd day, it even reached a point where they could display stable combination. And that was only possible because Harold had adjusted his level to the members of Cody's squad.

If only individual strength was considered, then Harold was above Robinson and the other 2. If they tried to adjust to Harold's skill, then they would be nothing more than baggage. Only because Harold had held back his strength was it possible for them to coordinate smoothly.

Although he was abusive from beginning to end, his conduct was one of trying to make use of his comrades' strength and erasing their weaknesses. Even though he had higher strength, without having anything to do with him looking down on them, he respected them and even excelled at working with them. He was a boy whose speech and conduct was not in gear at all.

If he really looked down on his comrades as worthless existences, then he would not have been able to coordinate this well. Although he thought so, on the other hand he could not help but think that Harold's strength was high enough to do even this no matter what

his true feelings were.

All throughout the examination, he was not able to grasp Harold's true nature. That said, Harold's results were so good that there was no way for him to fail Harold even by mistake. However, he felt an indistinct sense of discomfort.

While he was being bothered by that, the examination ended and they started moving so as to return to the Royal Capital by the next morning. They departed at 6 in the morning, and if nothing were to happen, they would return before the day came to an end. Forming ranks in the same way as they had come, they had lunch en route and progressed without any delays. Eventually, by the time they had traversed more than half the distance from the Capital, that happened.

"What is that?"

The one who noticed it first and raised his voice, was Lukas. To that, everybody's gazes concentrated towards the front. A few hundred meters from Sakrith and the others, a dark red something was squirming.

"…… Is it smoke? No, for it to be that, it's color and movements are not normal."

"It's somewhat hazy though"

"Perhaps, a monster of some new species?"

Each of them voiced their speculations, but it was not as though they were able to ascertain it's identity. Since it was on their way, for now, they decided to approach it for confirmation, but among them, Harold's face was grimmer than usual . The ones who noticed it were Sakrith and another person.

"Harold-kun, do you know what that is?"

Cody asked in a whisper. Only Harold and Sakrith were able to hear it.

"Who knows. But if you do not feel anything from it, then you

bastards have lost quite your edge."

Being questioned, Harold answered without moving his gaze away from the dark red body. He did not know why the boy was feeling so much danger from it. But he would soon come to know that Harold's senses had hit the mark.

Becoming distinct after they neared it, the dark red body was like mist. Its form was similar to a column, and as though it was oozing out from the ground, after it rose to about 150 cm high, it was dispersing. But other than that, they were not able to find a single clue that came close to finding out the dark red mist body's identity.

"Is something buried?"

The instant Shido bent his knees and tried to lean over, the mist swayed greatly. That part transformed as though it possessed a will. Simultaneously, Harold's sharp voice flew.

"Get back!"

"Eh? Uo!"

The formed sickle bent like a whip and attacked Shido. The one who pulled Shido, who was not able to deal with the abrupt change, by his nape to evade the attack was Harold, who had leapt while shouting. It was precisely a hair's breadth. If he had been late by even an instant, then Shido's head would have been cut off by the mist sickle.

His bangs, which seemed to have been cut by the mist sickle, fluttered down. Understanding what had occurred, Shido, with a somewhat blue face, expressed his gratitude towards Harold.

"Y, you saved me ……. Thanks, Harold."

"That does not matter. Stand up immediately, you blockhead."

It was a very harsh manner of speaking to someone who had just almost lost his life, but that was how pressing the situation was. That was because before they knew it, a few more dark red mist

bodies had appeared.

“We’re surrounded!”

“What the hell is this?”

The mist bodies had appeared as though to surround them. The 6 mist bodies, including the ones that had newly appeared, uniformly formed sickles and started moving as though drawing a circle. Looking at this bizarre and unreal spectacle, everybody tottered.

There was a single person who did not waver at this creepy scene in front of him. After a single breath of time, Harold started attacking the mist without any hesitation. It was a speed which he had not shown in the examination. Sakrith was astonished by his seemingly endless ability, but meanwhile, Harold cut the enemy using that untraceable speed.

The mist body that was attacked looked as though it was dispersed ……. But immediately, it became the same as before. After repeating it for a few times, Harold returned back towards them.

“Physical attacks do not work. Even if the blade comes in contact, the sword just goes through. Also, we probably can not defend.”

“On top of that, their attacks are effective, huh …… ..”

Looking at how Shido's hair was cut, there was no mistake. Attacks were ineffective against the enemy, and they were exposed to undefendable attacks.

"T, there's no way we can win against something like that …… .."

"Will not it be fine if we just run away !?"

Robinson and Aileen, whose experience in falling into unexpected situations was shallow, were flustered. Shido too had not recovered from fear. With their conditions, combat would be impossible. When he was about to make them fall back temporarily, Harold rudely remonstrated them .

"If you have the time to be flustered, work your head. If you do not want to die, draw your swords." Bolt Lance. ' "

With a crackling sound as though the air was being ripped, an enormous lance of lightning was fired. That lance which boasted more than enough power to kill the enemy directly hit one of the mist bodies. Due to that, the mist dispersed, but once again, it immediately returned back to it's original state. But as though he did not even care about that, Harold consecutively fired magic.

"" Flame Column, "" Aqua Slash ' "

The effect immediately became visible. The mist body that was engulfed by Flame Column regained its former shape as though nothing had happened, but the one that was hit by the Aqua Slash dispersed, and as though drifting towards the sky, it disappeared.

"Water attribute magic is effective, huh?"

Harold fired Aqua Slash towards the mist objects in rapid succession. Every attack made a direct hit, but only a single one disappeared due to the magic. The other 4 were same as before. The answer that could be derived from this was-.

"Only magic of a specific attribute is effective, huh."

"The attribute that is effective changing depending on the specimen is a problem."

“Are you bastards morons? Before complaining, hit each and everyone of them with magic.”

“You are quite right.”

Harold, Cody and Sakrith simultaneously fired magic. Lightning rained down incessantly, massive flames surged and winds blew violently. The grasslands which were green turned into scorched earth before their eyes.

After all the dark red mist bodies disappeared, Sakrith, after somehow escaping danger, was relieved, but instantly became cautious of the surroundings and confirmed their safety. Thinking, ‘It seems as though there are no reinforcements’, he regained his composure.

“Is anybody hurt?”

“W, we’re fine …… ..”

None of them were injured. Sakrith was relieved at that, but that too was thanks to Harold’s instant judgment and finding the clue to solve the situation. If, for example, were he to be in command, would they have gotten through it in such a fast yet accurate manner, and also without anyone being injured?

He could not help but think that it would have been difficult. At the very least, he would not have been able to avoid Shido getting fatally injured. It was as Harold had said.

“If you do not feel anything from it, then you bastards have lost quite your edge.”

In spite of being warned, not stopping Shido from approaching it unprepared, was without a doubt his fault since he was the current leader of this squad. He had almost let a person die right in front of him. Sakrith bowed towards Harold.

“Thank you, Stokes-kun. And forgive me. The cause of this crisis was my judgmental error”

“Do not count something of this level as a crisis. But do not make

the same mistake again.”

With this, it was unknown as to who the superior actually was. But still, Sakrith engraved those words in his mind, and gave a reply showing his resolution.

“I’ll bear it in mind. For sure.”

◇

Sakrith’s gratitude had not reach Harold’s ears. He was shaken to such an extent that he could do nothing other than reply mechanically. Looking at it from a distance, he was suspecting that it might be possible, but when he understood that they were the real thing, Harold’s frank mental state was “Why is this here !?”.

Dark red mist, its official name in the original work was Eerie Cloud. It was an enemy on whom physical attacks were ineffective and which could only be damaged by a randomly predetermined magic. There was no need to give a special mention of its offensive ability or stamina or resilience, but the troublesome point was that it was impossible to defend against Eerie Cloud’s attacks. There was no way other than to somehow evade them and hit them with magic.

Due to that, he fought against them while deducing in front of Cody and the others. In the game, there was an item called “Search Glass” that could confirm an enemy’s stamina and weakness, but for some reason, it did not exist in this world. He had thrown away his thinking about how each and everything was the same as in the game a long time ago, and the non-existence of Search Glass was a huge aid to that.

But what was important was not that. Eerie Cloud was a monster that had a deep relation to the progression of the story, and originally it was a monster that appeared near the middle to final stages of the game. More clearly, their appearance was proof that the Last Boss, Eustace’s plan called Earth Encroachment was progressing steadily.

That which should have appeared 5 years from the start of the

game had appeared at this stage. No matter how he thought about it, it was too fast. There was a possibility that in the produced game, they had not appeared until the story had progressed to a certain point and had actually existed from the start. But if he were to assume the worst, then it could be thought that Eustace's plan had sped up compared to the game. If that were the case, then the original work's events might accelerate, and it might develop into a direction unknown to Harold.

Not each and everything was the same as the game. In spite of thinking that, why had he been so conceited as to think that the story would progress like in the game. The promulgation of the medicine in the Sumeragi territory and his own enlistment in the chivalric order. If said, even those were ahead of the original work. It was Harold's fatal mistake to have taken the speeding up of the original story lightly.

(Wait, wait, calm down. It is not sure that that is the case …… ..)

He quietly adjusted his breathing and somehow maintained his calm. The thought just now was only assuming the worst case. The story might not necessarily have sped up. But there was a need to confirm it.

Eustace Freund.

Outwardly, he was a scientist who was praised as a genius. But his true nature was that of one who would fine in even destroying the world for his own ambitions, a lunatic. And he was also the perpetrator who had guided the original work's Harold to his death.

If Harold wanted to follow the story, then making contact with him was unavoidable, but Eustace was such a dangerous existence that he was considering what he could do to avoid him. If he himself did not approach the other party, he would not be able to gain information. Even for avoiding a development like- being too late by the time he realized it, he had to take the risk.
And so, with a new and extra-large anxiety factor budding up, Harold's final examination came to an end.

Translated by Madao.

Chapter 14

After finishing the examination and returning to the Royal Capital, Harold continued living busy days like before, working on the miscellaneous tasks and training, while waiting to be informed of the results and also racking his brains on how to get in contact with Justus. Justus's laboratory existed within the Royal Capital and in the game he had also come to the Royal Castle. If he thought of making contact, then he could do so.

But if the condition of not making him vigilant was added, then the difficulty level skyrocketed. But Justus's plan was a covert one and an absolute secret, and even if he were to include someone in the process to use them, he must have done the core part of it alone. More than anything, Harold had a complete grasp of this plan which was supposed to be an absolute secret. There was the danger of him seeing through that truth from Harold's behavior since he was a genius. And if that happened, he might use any and all means to seal Harold's mouth.

「Ha……. 」

Then he might as well take him by surprise and arrest him, but again the risk was high. The main concern was the degree of completion of Earth Encroachment. Even if it was possible to arrest Justus, if the Earth Encroachment plan had progressed, then at the current stage the only one who might be able to stop it was the person himself.

「…….rold 」

But Justus himself stopping the plan was absolutely unlikely to happen. Even if he had to throw away his own life, Justus would try to fulfill his desire. On top of that, if he were to awaken "that power", then it was unthinkable for him to be able to defeat him alone. If it went wrong, then even before Ryner's party took any action, the continent would fall.

In the first place, there was not enough evidence to arrest Justus. Even if he were to frankly give the whole picture of the plan to

Vincent and the others, it wasn't difficult to imagine that they wouldn't pay any proper attention to it since it was too crazy. Who would believe some nonsense like Justus turning the world into a vessel to fulfill his desire to revive the dead.

「Harol–」

「Shut up」

He interrupted the repeated calls for him that had been coming from a while ago. With his name being called so persistently, there were limits to ignoring it. Stopping the arm that had been swinging the sword, he reluctantly turned towards the owner of the voice, Shido.

「What, you noticed, huh」

As though it was unexpected, Shido said that. Unfortunately, since he was practicing in a place where not a single person was around, he could immediately know if someone came. A dim place under the shadows of a thicket and a dilapidated building that seemed to have been a stable, it was the best spot to be alone. As to why he was practicing in such a place, it was because recently, he had started to get into quarrels even in the training grounds. They must have thought of tormenting him overtly in the name of practice. He had judged that in the worst case, even if he got into a quarrel here, they wouldn't be a bother to the surroundings.

「Isn't that obvious? I was just ignoring you」

「Isn't that worse?」

Really, that was exactly right. That said, since this mouth couldn't even gloss things over, he couldn't help but give up. Harold ignored Shido's comeback and continued the conversation.

「So, what do you want?」

Being shown interest, Shido suddenly bowed vigorously. It was a deep bow with his torso bent in a right angle. Towards Harold, who was inwardly bewildered at this sudden action, Shido made a request.

「Please train us!」

Harold lost his words for a bit. Sure Shido still couldn't be called first-rate, but still he had endured harsh training for a knight for 3 years and had improved his strength. And he had requested Harold, who was a newbie and moreover 6 years younger than himself. It was quite unexpected to the one who had been requested.

「You're being an eyesore, raise your head. To begin with, who are you indicating by saying "us"?」

「Me, Robin and Aileen」

As expected, the request seemed to be from the usual trio. Listening to that, Harold sighed without even trying to conceal it. The feelings that were in it was "these guys too, huh".

「Where did those 2 go?」

「They're in the middle of patrolling the city. That's why, only I have come to request this of you, but all of us agree」

Being requested like this to train them, he couldn't help but be perplexed. Because most probably, there was no technique that Harold could teach them. It went without saying that Shido and the other 2 had a deeper understanding of the basics for the members of the chivalric order, and being relied on to such an extent, he could only be baffled. He was just trying to reproduce movements from the game without having any reliable basis for techniques, and in that condition what could he possibly teach.

And those were his true thoughts. But it wasn't as though there were no merits in working out a way to increase their strength. There was a possibility of the 3 of them, Shido, Robinson and Aileen, losing their lives in the battle 2 years later. And Harold still hadn't decided whether to save them, resolving himself for the destruction of the original work, or not. In the first place, he didn't even know whether it was an event where he could do something to save them.

It would already be more than a month since meeting the 3 of

them. There had been many chances for them to deepen their friendship, and if possible he didn't want them to die. For it to also not become a situation where when he made the resolve to save them, it was already too late, it shouldn't become useless if he were to strengthen them.

「…… Alright then. Tomorrow, bring the other 2 also here」

「Okay, thanks!」

After worrying for a bit, Harold decided to accept. No matter how it went in the future, it should be helpful in dealing with the situation. And he also had another purpose. Even if he used them, it wouldn't a problem.

The next day after giving a reply smeared with self-interest. In that desolate and gloomy space, 8 people, quite a number, were gathered. They were Shido's group of 3 and the 5 members of the 94th term 7th squad including Harold. The mood had become awkward because Shido's and Isaac's groups weren't acquainted, but Harold ignored that and started speaking.

「Then, let's start」

Without any preface or explanation, all of a sudden, those words came out. To that, the other seven each exchanged glances and became baffled.

「You say start, but first what should we do?」

「Draw your sword. All of you simultaneously come at me」

「Haa!? No matter what, that's underestimating us too much!」

The owner of the voice was the only female, Aileen. Though it was a queer unfeminine voice. Although he could understand that feeling of reflexively reacting like that, his mouth wouldn't come along in explaining each and every reason. And above all, to make them understand various things, it would be faster to actually fight them at least once.

「Don't talk back」

He didn't know what kind of change occurred, but his irritation at not being able to explain came out as wrath. Thereupon, everyone's face's instantly became pale. 'I'm so scary that just by threatening them a little, this happens, huh. Even for me, I feel doubtful', thought Harold. If that was the case, he could understand why people usually didn't approach him. The person was troublesome enough since he quarrels with his seniors, and if such a person were to give off an intimidating air, then it was natural for normal people to avoid him.

「Small fries should act like small fries and attack in a group. I'll teach you that even if you do so, I'm an existence that you can't reach」

While reflecting upon his solitude, this time he provoked them. This 1 vs many situation was exactly what Harold desired. Until now, he had fought against multiple monsters alone, but he hadn't fought against multiple humans. For the future, he wanted to accumulate experience of fighting against a large number. Since at any rate, there was a possibility of him having to face-off against the protagonist party alone.

「I'm going to make use of you bastards as my stepping stones. If you want to become strong, then learn from fighting against me and try to steal my techniques. Well, I think that's impossible though」

As an insurance, he also ridiculed them.

「…… Bring it on!」

Shido glared at Harold as though wanting to intimidate him and drew his sword. Following him, everybody took their battle stances. No matter what, all the people who were in the chivalric order were exceptional ones. Being made fun of to such an extent, there was nobody who wouldn't get mad.

「That's good. Struggle as much as possible to entertain me」

With those words as the start, a melee with 8 people jumbled together started.

◇

「–And that's it for the report」

Sakrith finished giving the report about this time's final examination held as an exception. Listening to it, the people who had been gathered here to decide the result of the examination would voice out their impressions. More than a few people must have been surprised at the report that had been given just now. Almost all of it was about Harold's high ability and the existence that seemed to be a monster they had met in the middle of their journey. There were even some of them who were skeptical about the contents of the report. In front of these people, Vincent started speaking.

「Each of you must have your own opinions, but as you've all heard, Harold might be young, but if it's only about strength, then he surpasses the company commander class. And we can also see that even in commanding abilities he is rare, so if we officially assign him to a squad early on and foster his actual combat experience, it should be possible to increase his strength more」[1]

「I understand Vincent-kun's thoughts. Even I think that that training plan is logical」

The one gave that reply was the person who administered the composition of the corps of the chivalric order, Maelstrom[2]. When he narrowed his eyes, his age could be felt from how the wrinkles around his eyes deepened. It wasn't a sharp gaze which could pierce through a person, but still, with a oppressive air, Maelstrom asked Vincent.

「But on the other hand, I feel that it is somewhat fast. With Harold's nature that I've heard about, without a doubt he'll raise waves in his relationship with his surroundings. He's still young and it won't be too late even if we take some time to teach him about those matters, right?」

「What you are saying is exactly right. And because I have the perfect squad for that kind of rectification, this time's plan is the result」

「Let's hear about it then」

「Yes. I think that Maelstrom-dono doesn't know, but……」

Vincent explained the circumstances that were presently surrounding Harold. Harold had overwhelmed his seniors one after the other in a fight held in the name of enrollment examination. Due to that he was being resented by a part of them and kept being attacked persistently. And because of this, many people were keeping away from Harold, isolating him. In this condition, it might be difficult for him to get involved with his surroundings.

「……. I see. Quickly inserting Harold into a squad that bears no ill will towards him, huh. In that case, even if it's only within the squad, he might able to build a relationship」

「Yes. And the one I'm suggesting, Cody, excels at understanding humans. Especially building relations with subordinates, there's no other person who's better than him. And moreover, Cody was the one who invited Harold, and he also seems to be acquainted with the members of his squad since he has been seen having friendly conversations with them」

He was exaggerating a bit. From what Shannon had said, it seemed as though Shido would obstinately get involved with Harold, who was basically always frowning, and Robinson and Aileen would watch over them while being exasperated at times or while smiling wryly. But still, since Harold hadn't show any stony kind of behavior, it seemed as though he too had somewhat opened up.

「Nevertheless, it's sad. Although Harold's behavior is also at fault, to think that there were insolent people who would play dumb to their own short-comings even in the chivalric order」

「It is my lack of care. As soon as I identify those who attacked him, I'll hand out the proper punishment. And also, since there seem to be people who are instigating others to act against Harold, I'm in the middle of confirming it」

「Since you are taking action, I won't say anything more. And so, getting back to the topic, assigning him to a squad is to get him to

accumulate experience, rectifying his personality and also for it to act as an obstruction to the animosity shown towards him from the surroundings, right? 」

「 Yes. I'm saying this even though knowing it isn't admirable, but I don't mind if you think of it as a measure to avoid destroying Harold's ability 」

To his words, everybody in that place became unsettled. The him who was famous for being just and upright in regards to his duties and who would be an impartial judge towards anybody, was openly saying that Harold should be given special treatment. And they understood. That Harold was an existence who possessed such extraordinary talent that it was enough to even make Vincent back him.

「 …… He has so much talent that it has even charmed Vincent-kun, huh. Then I won't say anything anymore. Then, I approve of him officially enlisting into the squad 」

「 Thank you for understanding 」

There was nobody who objected Maelstrom's decision. Harold joining Cody's squad had been officially decided. Until now, it had all gone according to Vincent's plan, but at the last moment an unexpected interruption came.

With a snap, the door to the conference room opened. Without even any kind of acknowledgment and with just a 「 Pardon me 」, the one who appeared was a middle-aged man with a protruding belly.

「 You all, sorry for being so sudden. But it seems like a somewhat hopeful newbie has joined, huh 」

「 Right, thankfully. By the way, what kind of business does Harrison-dono have? 」

「 Since I heard that that kid's treatment is being decided, I was curious. I didn't mean to hinder it, but since I had a helpful suggestion right when required, I just unconsciously intruded 」

While patting his stomach, Harrison, who had sat in a vacant seat

without even excusing himself, laughed as though something pleasant was happening. It was an extremely haughty attitude.

「Can we receive a concrete explanation?」

「It's a kind of patrol duty. It isn't like there's an emergency or that there's high risk, but the place is far. He'll have to go to the national border」

「That is again quite difficult」

「But if it's around the border, there should be people who are normally assigned to patrol duty though, right?」

Since only the headquarters at the Royal Capital couldn't quickly solve all situations, there were a few branches of the chivalric order established within the Kingdom. It was arranged so that when there was an emergency, they would all unite and take actions, but if the branches themselves could take care of a situation, normally they would solve it on their own and would later on send a report to the headquarters. Patrolling duties near the national border was a general duty of the branch.

「A notification that they want reinforcements has come. Recently, it seems as though the Beltiz[3] forest is turbulent so they want to make a serious investigation, but it seems like they don't have enough personnel」

「I didn't receive such a report though……?」

「What, is that true? There must have been some kind of mistake」

Folding his arms, Harrison tilted his head. Although he looked barefaced, more than that, there was a word that couldn't be ignored in what Harrison had said.

「By the way, if you're talking about the Beltiz forest, it's the region where the Star Reader 《Stellar》 tribe live. It won't be easy to enter」

Star Reader (Stellar) tribe. Also called as the people of the stars, they were the continent's oldest race. Even the people of the stars,

who had been ruling the whole continent in the past, after exhausting their prosperity had their population reduced due to the many conflicts over power over a long period of time. The negligible amount of descendants who had survived until now were living as a small and closed-off community. They were a race which had many mysteries.

Maybe because of that history, their hate towards other races' interference was extreme. If the chivalric order were to investigate the Beltiz forest, they would oppose quite strongly. If they tried to forcibly push through, there was a danger that it might even develop into battle. Towards Maelstrom's worried question, once again Harrison answered looking triumphant while shaking his belly.

「We're currently in the middle of negotiations. Well, it isn't as though we will intrude into their livelihood sphere, so if we just tell them beforehand, there will be no problem. Coming to the real issue, I thought about having that newbie accompany them on this patrolling mission」

「…….. The reason is?」

「No matter how outstanding he is, won't the risk be too much if we suddenly throw him into actual combat? As I've explained, this time's patrolling mission's risk is low. If it becomes a long term investigation, he'll have more time to connect with the other members, and isn't it the perfect mission for participating in for the first time?」

Certainly, Harrison's words made sense. Even Vincent hadn't thought of putting Harold in a mission that required combat as his first one. But it was true that he wanted to send him out on missions from early on. Seeing through Vincent's plan, Harrison had called this suggestion as "help arriving at the right time".

What he was worried about was as to why Harrison was being so cooperative. His official post was the supervision head, which was to bring together the chivalric order and the national army. In other words he was the person in control of this Kingdom's military.

However, the chivalric order and the army were unable to cooperate. The main reason was because of the awareness that the chivalric order was above the army that was spread among the public. Originally, there was no above or below with the chivalric order and the army, and as organizations they were equal. Then as to why that kind of awareness had spread about was because of the huge difference in the chance to play an active role.

The chivalric order would actively move out with regards to various situations, but because the army was passive since their main mission was defense, large-scale missions were scarce for them. The chivalric order which had many flashy activities was a flourishing job while the army was simple- this image had taken root. In reality, the number of people who aimed for the chivalric order but entered the army because of failing the examination was extremely high. They too perceived that the chivalric order was above the army.

While being exposed to that tendency, Harrison had a history of climbing up to the supervision head while he had been affiliated to the army. Even from the time he was affiliated to the army, he had been competitive with the chivalric order regarding each and every matter that had come up. He had even narrated, “I turned the resentment of not being able to enroll into the chivalric order into power and rose up in the world”. Although only he himself knew what his true motives were, taking his behavior until now into account, it could be seen that he was making the chivalric order out to be his enemy at each and every turn.

It wasn’t a good way of putting it, but he was suspicious. When he was being cooperative to this extent, more than a few doubts rose up in Vincent’s head. That was how much unlike Harrison it was.

「…… You’re right. I’ll take into consideration」

He was unable to read Harrison’s aim, but since he didn’t have any definite reason to refuse the proposal, for now, Vincent gave that reply. Hearing that, leaving behind 「More than anything else, I was able to help you all」, Harrison left the conference room. And a few days later, Harold’s name was there in the list of members that would participate in that patrolling mission.

TL-
1. Vincent is speaking to his superiors so he is being very respectful
2. Maelstrom – ミルストラム (Mirusutoramu)
3. Beltiz – ベルティス (Berutisu)

Chapter 15

That day, Harold received a letter. After checking the sender's name, it turned out to be from Yuno.

'Why would she send me a letter?' Harold tilted his head, remembering the exchange that took place between them when he informed them he was entering the Knights.

The current management and representation of LP farming was still on track when he left, but they still had to send progress reports to Harold regularly. So far, there didn't seem to be any problems because he always had the chance to check things in person, but that's changed ever since he joined the Knights.

Instead, he went with the suggestion of switching to written reports to check on their status. Harold didn't really like this method, but it was an annoyance that he'd have to accept.

Though for the sender's name, they were *supposed* to use one that wouldn't raise suspicion on his relationship with the Sumeragi House, due to an event that will happen in the future.

Tasuku was aware that Harold meant to discard his engagement with Erika later on. If this were to be exposed, the Sumeragi House would be put under a lot of scrutinies, so considerations like this were made to keep his engagement with Erika hidden.

The letter with Yuno's name on it probably wasn't Tasuku's idea, because this would only confirm the connection between him and the Sumeragi. Well, his engagement with Erika had already been leaked to Cody.

Though this wasn't Tasuku's fault, from the beginning it was impossible to perfectly conceal this information, because there was no way his father, Hayden would keep quiet about it.

As he recalled such a father, Harold opened the envelope with a sigh.

The five parchments included inside displayed the profits gained from the LP farming method, all the contents and the numbers, such as business scales were completely written in minute detail. In addition to this, Harold realised that there was one more thing he needed to look out for, comrades.

Unfortunately, the current Harold had no real expertise in management. The anticipation of this fact was another reason why he had ceded his position so early on to Tasuku, this way nobody would come for his opinion on matters he wasn't sure of.

Though to only send back a blank letter with the words "Do as you like," written on it would be too irresponsible as the founder of LP farming.
It goes without saying that Tasuku was doing a great job so far, but it wouldn't be good to settle in that mindset.
Right now instead of making a profit, they needed to slowly spread it out to other nobles to gain apathy rather than hostility.

For now LP farming is 'being developed' by the Sumeragi House, but is offering support to the Stokes House. The two houses have a monopoly on the technique, but their revenue in comparison to what they could be earning is average.

It's that sort of thing.
If they disclosed the technique by gradually selling it, instead of announcing it upfront to all the aristocracy in the Chamber of Commerce, they'll reduce the risk of more trouble developing later on.

That said, one should take care to not become a shallow wit. Watch over what markets begin to develop while keeping track of the timing on how often the techniques were spread to the other nobles, etc. All of these were things Harold was confident in leaving to Tasuku.

Though there was no way he was going to just spoon feed them this advice.

After thinking things through on what kind of stance he wanted to take on this, Harold immediately took up his pen.

As his pen silently ran over the parchment, his roommates tottered to the back of the room wobbly, while leaking out groans akin to zombies.

Every day, since they asked for his guidance, Issac and the others, worked hard in continuous mock battles against Harold. Needless to say, it was Harold's landslide victory every time. He didn't even break a sweat clashing swords at close speeds. While on the other hand, Isaac and the others had become ragged on a daily basis. Their suffering didn't end even after they lost because they were forced to fight until their strength was completely exhausted. Falling down on his bed, Isaac turned his face towards Harold, who was currently sitting at a desk.

"Harold-kun, can you give me a second please?"

"What?"

"I've been entrusted with a message from Captain Cody, 'Tomorrow, after you finish your morning training come to my room.' he said, and that's all…"

Once Isaac had finished saying what he needed to, he immediately fell asleep, his breathing steady. There wasn't even any time to reply.

Tomorrow will probably be when they announce how he passed their test. This was something that one was only supposed to receive after being here for a great deal of time, so when this gets out, along with his already infamous reputation, he'd receive even more scorn than before.

Little did he know it, but the reality that was waiting for Harold

was even harsher than what he imagined.

The next morning, he was called out to by Cody and the rest of the squad, so he couldn't help but feel like something bad was going to happen.

"What a coincidence! Good morning Harold-kun, how's your mood this fine day?"

"…terrible."

This was truly the worst, *this* group taking such showy actions towards him so early in the morning? Just what did he do to trigger a flag like this?
In retrospect, maybe completing the exam they gave him was the flag to cause this ominous event in the first place.

"Let's finish this quickly then. Harold-kun, you have been officially assigned to my squad, so let's get along from now onwards, 'kay~"

(…seriously?)

Harold could almost hear something snap in his head. Out of all the squads that he could've been selected to join, it just had to be the one that he wished not to be in the most.
His mind was instantly flooded with depression as Robinson and the others added their greetings as well.

"I'll be counting on you from now on Harold!"

Shido went ahead and nudged Harold's shoulder against his own.

Robinson and Irene chimed in unison, both welcoming him.

"It's encouraging to know that you'll be in the same squad as us, Harold-kun."

“But *we’re* the seniors here so make sure to drop that attitude and respect us a bit more, okay?”

It would be a lie to say that he wasn’t happy with this reaction. For the him that’s always shunned due to the provocations that are always spoken against his will, normal contact with other people was a precious thing.
However, this was the squad that would be wiped out in the future, leaving Cody as the only survivor, but this was an essential part of advancing the original ‘storyline.’
The fact that he had just become a member of said squad, was akin to being sentenced to death. Before he could worry about saving Robinson and the other’s lives, he had to figure out how to save his own.

(Certainly, Cody’s squad is destroyed four years before the start of the game, meaning one year from now. Can that be avoided if the squad changes enough before the event?)

Before Harold could even begin pondering whether or not there was a way to avoid certain death, things had taken a turn for the worse.

“Also, one week from now certain squads are getting five days off to use as we like, and we’re among the squads chosen.”

“Why now of all times?”

“We’re getting a vacation, shouldn’t you be happy about it?”

“It’s because they expect us to go on an expedition afterwards, and since we were chosen to participate in it, they’re giving us a few days to relax. Well, I wonder how much value they place on our talents to choose us.”

The one that had answered his question wasn't Cody, but Robinson.

"Isn't it a bit harsh to just throw us into an expedition all of a sudden?"

"It doesn't seem like too big of an issue considering the location, some place called Blitz Forest."

Blitz Forest.

The moment he heard Cody speak those words Harold could feel his entire body go rigid.

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Blitz Forest, an unexplored land where the mysterious Star Aria race, the 'Stella' resided.

The skirmish between the Knights and the Star Aria Tribe in the original game is the battle where Cody loses his entire squad, causing him to leave the Knights as a result.

As to why they had to engage in combat, it's because soldiers of the enemy disguised themselves as knights, launching surprise attacks on both the Knights and the Star Aria Tribe respectively. Seeing how they were allowed to traverse the forest, the mastermind had taken this as an opportunity to break this trust in the worst possible way, leading to a deep fissure in the relationship between the two races for years to come.

The mastermind of this incident wasn't the one who had attacked and framed betrayal on both sides, but Justus who had incited that person into doing so in the first place. His goal was to analyse certain traits unique to the Star Aria Tribe and capture a number of them for research during the confusion of the battle.

Robinson and the others died, Cody left the Knights, and Justus was

free to advance his research with new test subjects as well. The battle that will take place in Blitz Forest is only related to the game by a single item used in the game's main story. An intervention, in this case, shouldn't affect the world's future by too much, so that's why Harold didn't hesitate in wanting to help, but it was a whole other story if there was only this small margin of time left to prepare.
In the meantime, he would have to think this through.

What to do? Participation in the battle was guaranteed at this point, but how was he supposed to react?
Harold's heart pounded in dread, it might've been the first time he's ever panicked so much since entering the game world.
His head could by no means be considered calm and clear.

He was idly thinking, clinging to any idea that would materialise for a hope of success, *that* was Harold's current state of mind.
Yet there were only five days off before the expedition.

Without any clear reason as to why. Harold's feet seemed to have turned to the direction of the Sumeragi territory.

Harold himself couldn't answer why this was happening, but he was pretty sure that anyone he could confide with wouldn't be able to put out a decent answer either.
To end such anguish and just escape there would be a huge load off his mind.

It had been about two months since he last visited the Sumeragi House. Without any warning, a man who belonged at the mansion he was just thinking about had entered the room.
What greeted Harold was an old man, who if he remembered correctly was named Kiryu.

"Well, what do we have here, its Harold-sama. How is your day today? I would love to hear all about it."

“This is urgent, bring out Tasuku already.”

It may be nothing, but he wished that they had given him a warning before sending someone over.

“The master won’t be able to meet you right now, but will visit at nightfall.”

“Tch.”

Almost involuntarily Harold clicked his tongue. Half of it was because they had created this abrupt meeting all of a sudden, but the other half was due to the dissatisfaction of learning the Tasuku was still absent.
Although time passed in the guest room, it was unbearable to have to wait until nightfall before Tasuku’s visit. All he could do was sit, and let his anxiety and frustration slowly rise.
Even telling himself that he’d be able to resolve some things once Tasuku came, still wasn’t enough to stop his negative feelings.

A kind of bloodlust started to build up inside of him as time past, almost impatiently asking him to just leave already, but after looking around, there didn’t seem to be any valid means of doing so.

The sound of someone appearing on the other side of the sliding door caused Harold to grind his teeth a little.

“Please excuse me.”

It was a cool voice that seemed to calm Harold’s heat tinged head.

Suddenly speaking was a girl with gestures so graceful that they seemed increasingly similar to her mother Koyomi, maybe even surpassing her in some places, day by day.
After being in placed in such a desperate situation, Harold didn’t have the energy to be as hard-hearted as usual.

It was more than likely that visiting Harold was one of the things that she hated most in the world, so she was probably only here for business.

“…enter.”

To this reply, the sound of a breath being shakily drawn could be heard on the other side of the door. Apparently, his response was a surprise to her.
In a single breath, the door was slid open.

“It has been quite a long time, Harold-sama.”

After sitting down with perfect sitting posture, she politely bowed her head until it touched the floor before raising it up again.
Erika had arrived, dressed in a bright green kimono.

Translated by KuroInfinity.

Chapter 16

(Erika POV)

TN: The author constantly switches between first and third person (annoyingly), but I'll try to keep things first person, for consistency's sake.

It was so sudden.

For some reason, the house had abruptly grown into a state of disarray, when I had asked what everyone was so worked up about, they told me that Harold had come over for a visit.

That wasn't that unusual though, Harold had visited multiple times in the past to meet with Tasuku and Itsuki.

The real problem was that *they weren't here,* Harold had come at a time that they weren't present.

According to Kiryuu, an urgent matter had come up and that they had left to resolve it.

I, who had just been briefed on the situation with Harold, suddenly had a feeling well up that I couldn't explain.

"Where is Harold-sama now?"

"He's currently residing in the guest room."

"I see."

Once Kiryuu had left the room, I quickly got up on my feet and departed.

He had always avoided me, always given me the cold-shoulder, but I don't care anymore. Not minding my steps, I strided directly over to Harold's room with no hesitation at all, I had already overcome my weaknesses of past, I wasn't afraid anymore.

Arriving at the entrance to the guest room, she sat down and called

out from behind the sliding door.

“Please excuse my intrusion.”

Harold has always had a cold attitude towards me, so maybe I would be ignored, but just as Kiryuu said, ‘Acting impatiently will only get you subjected to more harsh words’.
Even so, I couldn’t back out now!

But to my surprise, Harold had acknowledged me, saying “Enter” in response.

I sat there, stunned for a moment at how smoothly everything was going, but since I had received permission, I opened the sliding door and entered.

“It’s been a long time, Harold-sama.”

I deeply bowed my head to him in greeting.

Harold sighed in response.

“Bastard, what are you plotting? Coming all the way here by yourself?”

Harold had convinced himself that he was hated by Erika, with how he had treated her so far, what else could he have thought?

‘Therefore there was no way Erika had come here of her own volition’, he had probably concluded.

‘Its nothing special, I just wanted to see you’, if I answered honestly without giving a proper reason, I’d just be kicked out, so taking a proper tone I replied,

“I’m not plotting anything. There’s no big reason behind why I decided to pay you a visit tonight.”

“Then what did you come here for?”

“Harold-sama, you’re my fiancé, a very important guest to the

Sumeragi House. Since both the head of the family and his wife, my parents, are absent, I'll be taking their place in greeting you tonight."

"Unnecessary, wasting my time here with a bastard like you is annoying."

His immediate response was negative, but I held on.

Our relationship as fiancés, the Sumeragi House's current status, the results brought from Harold's actions. There were innumerable reasons I could take advantage of.

"The Sumeragi Family would lose face if we didn't treat our guests with respect, and they couldn't make the time because your visit was so sudden, please understand."

"…"

Seeing that I had no intentions of leaving, Harold didn't press the subject any further. He knew that this was also partially his fault for arriving unannounced all of a sudden.

Acknowledging Harold's silence as his response, I lighted a fire in the hearth, which was built into the room, and began heating an iron kettle.

Harold didn't even look at me and remained silent. I on the other hand took in his profile as a whole, and felt that he wasn't his usual self.

Although his creased eyebrows and cold expression hadn't changed, the pressure he usually gave off to intimidate those around him had died down. It was barely there.

The facade that he put up to show that he didn't have any weaknesses had faltered to the extent that even I noticed it.

If another person looked at Harold right now, they would think that he was exactly the same as he usually was.

But I was different. I saw him that time.

Harold, who was always so blunt and brutal in every aspect of his being… was crying. That arrogant behaviour of his was made to conceal his weaknesses. He always tried to bear everything alone, so he had too.

Which is exactly why I had to support him.

“Here…”

I placed the tea leaves in the boiled water, poured it into a cup and placed it in front of Harold.

But Harold didn’t move to take it, or the snacks that I put out with the tea, he just sat there, silently. Eventually the tea had grown cold, and as I reached my hand out to replace it, Harold spoke,

“…Hey, bastard. How are things going in your life right now?”

Harold murmured, almost as if he were talking to himself.

He still wasn’t looking at me, but I knew the question wasn’t for himself.

It was very un-Harold-like question, he usually doesn’t take interest in others, at least on the surface.

Maybe the question really *was* for himself, rather than me. Maybe he felt he was being cornered with how forward I was being today and he needed to reassure himself. How troubling…

“I’m really happy with my current environment, and if you’re asking me if I have any dissatisfactions right now, then I have nothing to say as the Sumeragi House’s only daughter.”

Hopefully, this reply will comfort him a little.

I don’t know why, but it’s clear that he’s worried about something right now. Maybe if I could figure out what it was, and sympathize

with him, I'd be able to offer him a little bit of salvation.

I didn't like seeing Harold like this, he was supposed to be a person who walked proudly, being depressed didn't suit him.

I know that this was a selfish image that I've pressed on him, but I can't deny how I feel.

Unfortunately, I knew the truth, it was something I realized in the very depths of my soul. Even if I was good to him here, I could never be the true support that Harold needed.

That's why it's fine if my feelings are forsaken. Harold can only be Harold if he stands with his own power, any kindness I give him would only be an unnecessary annoyance.

"You're lying, those couldn't possibly be the feelings of a person who had been forced into an engagement with a partner that they didn't want."

'That's not true! I was more than grateful for being engaged with you as the Sumeragi House's daughter!' Though there was no way I could say this out loud.

Harold's eyes were cold, he really didn't seem to believe my words at all.

"I am the daughter of the Sumeragi House, born and raised by loving family and attendants, I am willing to do anything to repay the kindness that they have given me since long ago."

This was both a lie and the truth, even if Harold had turned out to be the worst kind of human being, if all it took to save my family was my hand in marriage, then I would gladly sacrifice myself.

But Harold had completely crushed my resolve for the better, ironically planning to dissolve our engagement of his own volition.

"Harold-sama, do you really dislike the thought of being engaged to me that much? I'm not so insensitive that I don't realize that I'm hated by you."

Taken back by my resolute response, Harold murmured in an almost inaudible voice.

"…why? Why would you accept such a hard reality?"

It's because I met with you.

I wanted to say those words so badly. I was inexorably attracted to your way of life, where you wouldn't hesitate in the slightest to protect others even if it would bring you pain. Fascinated by your strong beliefs, I had fallen in love with you before I even noticed.

Looking at Harold's figure who had just uttered such words, I wanted to tell him so bad. I wanted to ask him to look at me as a member of the opposite sex, as another person.
I could feel my feelings of longing and affection welling up inside, but I desperately tried to suppress it.

…I couldn't do it. The moment I did, I would only bring more things for Harold to worry about, and he's already suffered so much.
It took a while, but after clearing my throat with a cough, order had come back to my mind once again.

"…it's because Harold-sama's power is great. It wouldn't be a lie if I said I was envious of it."

Once the words had come out of my mouth, Harold's face froze, completely stunned, it was a face that he would never show normally, but was soon replaced by his usual expression.

He let out a sigh, "…so now you're trying to buy my favour through flattery?"

"These are my honest feelings. Harold-sama, you're an individual who cuts open a path created by your own power, anyone would envy that strength of yours."

He doesn't just face his problems with brute strength and force either, he has a broad perspective that allows him to see the full picture in any situation, a calm mind that can predict events as if he's seen the future, and the genius that allows him to produce

medicine to cure the miasma and develop revolutionary farming methods.

These are all extraordinary characteristics, and thinking about how amazing he was made me recall my father's words,

'He's talented, but he's a little *too* talented, that genius of his will force him into isolation one day.'

And that's why I worked so hard, I did my best to become a presence that can support him so that he wouldn't be alone.

…but only someone as amazing as Harold will be able to walk by his side, so my efforts were useless after all. Looking at Harold as he is now is a keen reminder of that.

"However, there's only so much that one person can do."

"…"

"Just because you *can* do something alone, doesn't mean that you *should*. Harold-sama, you should try relying on others a bit more."

Harold has the ability to do many things, even if he's working alone, so there's no need to rely on others, right? But maybe this was only because there was nobody he could rely on.

But by straining himself all the time, no matter how strong he is, isn't that a quick path to death? A sudden feeling of anxiety started welling up in my chest.

"Don't speak as if you know me."

"Certainly, I may not know much about you, Harold-sama, but aren't you the same?"

"What?"

"Harold-sama, don't you know that there are many people who would spare nothing to help you?"

Harold had gotten used to being alone. He was alone for so long

that it became a belief of his that he had to be alone.

Maybe it's because he was raised in such an environment that he has such a hard time trusting others.

I can hardly imagine how painful living in that environment must have been for him, it frightens me.

But it's different now, he has allies. Both Father and Itsuki are prime examples of that.

My family already considers Harold as one of our own, Harold can believe in us, we're here for him.

"I don't care if it's only once, but please try looking at your surroundings sometime, and I mean really look."

Because that way you'll surely find an existence you can trust.

Though, I couldn't help but feel a small pain in my chest at that moment, because I knew that that existence couldn't be me.

I left soon after.

* * *

(Harold POV)

'There's only so much that one person can do…'

Erika's words echoed in my head.

That argument wasn't justified at all, I was aware at how much higher the specs of my body were compared to my mind.

The only reason why I was able to do all these amazing things was because of the dirty cheat I had called 'Original Knowledge'.

On the other hand, Original Knowledge was just as much of a bane as it was a boon. The game scenario he once knew, was now equivalent to predicting the future of this world.

Although I was limited to only knowing the normal ending, I could

still make tremendous impacts on this world depending on my actions, and with every change, I increase the risk of being targeted by powerful forces.

So as to not reveal that I have knowledge of the future, I've done my best to ensure that I've done everything alone until now.

But Erika says that I have a limit, that eventually, I'll run into a problem that I won't be able to fix by myself.

I fell onto my back in thought.

It's not like I never relied on others, in the instances regarding Clara and Collette's rescue and the development of LP farming, I wouldn't have been able to do it without the help of Norman and Tasuku.

That said, it's not like I had full confidence in them either.

I didn't avoid others just because I risked exposure of having Original Knowledge, there's also the chance that I'll act in a way that deviates too much from the future that I know, and then my strongest asset would be rendered useless.

I'm scared of a future I don't know.

But is it like that now?

Looking back at my actions, I've already changed so many things. Clara had survived, LP farming methods were developed, the Sumeragi house had developed medicine for the miasma, and I've joined the knights three years earlier than I was supposed too.

Though most of them had to be done to avoid raising death flags.

But this time is different, Robinson has no direct influence on my death in the future, but should I really let him die just to avoid deviating from the original work?

They were conscripted in this battle against the Star Aria Tribe, a battle that they would die in, and they didn't even have a choice.

I rushed over here so I could consult with Tasuku about this

situation, but could this be the answer? After I was admonished by Erika, my mind felt clear for some reason.

It's impossible to avoid all the flags alone, the magnitude of this whole situation, couldn't be controlled by me alone.

The intervention of others might not follow the original story, but it might be another solution.

Maybe defeating Justus will resolve the whole situation and allow the original story to reorganize itself, that's another way to look at it.

Isn't this stupid? The more I deviate from the original work, the greater my disadvantage becomes.

But that can't be helped, this world is already deviating from the original.

The biggest problem is that Justus' plan is advancing ahead of schedule, there's a risk that Ryner's growth won't be able to keep up.

I'll have to apologize if I end up dying in the battle against the Star Aria tribe by accident.

…if that's how it's going to be then, Robinson's survival, Delaying Justus' plan, Strengthening Ryner, let's do it all!

If I fail, I'll die, but it's too late to worry about such things now! I've always been exposed to death flags from the moment that I had awoken in Harold's body.

Although this world will deviate from the original, there's always a chance that I'll be able to clear this game significantly.

Thinking about it, I might've been a bit paranoid about avoiding the risks, after all, it would be impossible for the trainee Harold to obtain the best results without taking risks.

Because I'm trying to overturn my fate of death, it's only natural that I should be willing to risk my life if I want to save it and grasp

the survival route.

It was a refreshing way to look at things. If you can't do something yourself, borrow the power of others, it's that simple.

I won't hesitate to ask for help when I need it now.

It's as if I had just reached enlightenment, and it's all thanks to Erika.

"There's only so much that one person can do."

"Harold-sama, you should try relying on others a bit more."

"Harold-sama, don't you know that there are many people who would spare nothing to help you?"

I think I was the only one of the two of us that thought she hated me. She really is, a dependable, beautiful girl. It's no wonder she was such a popular character in the original game.

I might've made a mistake when I tried to get her to hate me.

As I thought about such things, unbeknownst to me, a wry smile had formed on my face.

Translated by KuroInfinity.

Chapter 17

(Tasuku POV)

I had finally returned one sunny day, and instead of a greeting, I was promptly informed of Harold's visit instead. Probably because it's quite unusual for Harold to visit without telling us in advance, it was that kind of situation.

Harold was wearing a yukata at the time because it was already getting late.

"It's been a long time, Harold-kun. How was your day today?"

"There's something I need to talk to you about urgently."

Harold wasn't a person for pleasantries and cut straight to the point.

I also changed my posture to one for listening.

"Hmm, let me hear it."

"One week from now the Knight Order will leave for an expedition to the Blitz Forest."

"That's quite far,"

Blitz Forest was located near the border, it'd take a month just to travel there.

At the very least, they could shorten the trip by taking an airship to a nearby area.

"But isn't that too dangerous as your first assignment?"

"On the surface, it's only a patriotic mission, but there's a chance that it'll develop into a skirmish against the Star Aria Tribe."

"Wha-!"

I unintentionally let out a loud voice.

Harold just said that the Order and the Star Aria Tribe will fight, that there's a chance of his mission developing into an ethnic conflict.

It would've made a funny story if the person telling it was different.

"Are you sure about this? Why is that?"

"There's a traitor within the top brass, who's planning to guide the negotiations towards war."

It was hard to believe how he talked about such a topic so indifferently.

Well, the other party was Harold after all, he wouldn't say something like this without a reason why.

"…how so?"

"Their objective is the capture of the Star Aria Tribe, apparently they're the resources needed to conduct inhumane experiments and dissections. Basically, if one is captured, then that seals their fate to death."

"If what you're telling me is true, then this is a problem that can't be overlooked by humanity itself."

But if there's no evidence to justify these claims, then I, no, the Sumeragi Family can't move.

Even just putting in a request for a search of this scale will put the people involved at high risk.

While it may be a despicable inhumane practice, you just have to close your eyes and pretend it's not there sometimes.

"I can't put out any evidence, it's not possible, there's no written

reports or anything physical for me to procure."

"Then how did you learn about this secret, Harold-kun?"

It's only natural to doubt him at this point, this shouldn't have been able to obtain this information in the first place.

Well, Harold always did have a mysterious information network, but is the information he received really credible?

In the end, my hypothesis was right on the mark.

"'Giffelt', have you heard of this name before?"

For a moment, I couldn't understand what Harold had said, not because I haven't heard the name Giffelt before, but rather the opposite.

When one speaks of Giffelt, there's nobody who wouldn't know this name.

There's nothing in the world that he doesn't know, he's an information dealer who deals intel of all types.

However, that person is a fictional character.

"The rumours say if you're willing to pay enough, you can get any information you want in the world… from the fairy Giffelt."

Harold's face turned downcast at my remark, but when I shook my head a couple times in apology, he reverted back.

"Bastard, are you an idiot? To say you still believe in fairies, it's no wonder you're a weirdo, I don't know why anyone would call that thing a fairy in the first place."

"Wait one second there, Harold-kun… did you really meet, *that* 'Giffelt'?"

Giffelt was said to be an ugly being, similar to those talked about in urban legends. There's no way I wouldn't ask why he could say that he was its acquaintance with such a straight face.

The thing is, this boy in front of me wasn't exactly 'ordinary' either.

"…hmm? What?"

I really am an idiot, aren't I? Actually believing his story, but how else am I supposed to explain his information network?

Just by talking to him like this, I can tell he has a tremendous network of connections.

"Well, let's forget about that and move on to the main subject," Harold started again.

I could already feel my head throbbing due to how he just dumped all this amazing information on me and still hasn't reached the main issue.

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(Harold POV)

Using the name Giffelt brought out a bigger reaction from Tasuku than I expected. Giffelt was only a character from a fairy tale after all.

I was somehow able to stop myself from laughing.

There are a lot of stories that pass through gossip, and I'll use Tasuku to help spread the gossip on how 'Giffelt is real'.

'Information broker Giffelt' is a character that has little influence in the game and is only there to give explanations on the game's mechanics, hints on how to obtain items, and other tidbits like that throughout the game.

Although it didn't bring out any important information about clearing the game, it's a subtle character that can help you find rare high-level monsters in the forest dungeon, the hidden island in the middle of the sea, and the final area in the Last Boss' dungeon, earlier than normal.

By the way, its real name, age, and gender are all unknown due to

it mostly being covered by its androgynous appearance and its bulky hat.

I've never actually met it in this life, but apparently Giffelt actually exists in this world. I've already seen countless existences in the game, and I already know it somewhat personally, so it should be fine to tell one little lie, right?

Looking at Tasuku's reaction, I should be able to get away with using original knowledge as long as I use Giffelt as an excuse.

"I don't care if you believe me or not bastard, but you owe me so I'll give you this chance to pay me back."

Now it's time to negotiate. From a third person's view this might look despicable, but we've already been doing this for so long that it's become normal for us.

Though this might become a problem, right now I need to focus on proceeding the story.

"While I'm still here… prepare the Sarian Empire's military uniform for me within three days."

"The Empire's? What do you need that for?"

"I just need to wear it under my armour during the expedition. Once the battle starts, showing a figure wearing the uniform to both sides might dampen their motivation to fight slightly."

If an officer of the Empire appears in the middle of the battle between the Order and the Star Aria Tribe, both sides will start to question who the real enemy is.

The Empire's uniform is normally eye-catching by itself, but it should be even more conspicuous in the middle of a battlefield.

"That's too dangerous, in the worst case both sides will begin to concentrate their attacks on you instead."

I'm aware of what Tasuku is saying. If it was possible, then not just the battle, I would've liked to stop the whole expedition itself.

However, the reality is that I don't have the time or the means to take such measures.

"Don't make me laugh, as if they could put out attacks that could even scratch me."

As usual my mouth only lets out excessively arrogant responses, it's only natural that I'd feel fear and anxiety in such a situation.

But I can't back out now. I won't be able to obtain Tasuku's cooperation in this matter unless I show him an absolute resolve that this is something that I can accomplish, or else he'll never make a move.

With the circumstances as they are, rather than a proposal to a plan, doesn't it look like I'm blackmailing him into accepting?

At worst, Tasuku wouldn't provide any support in this matter at all. Although I don't want to get into too much debt with the Sumeragi family, or else it'll get harder for me to separate myself from them in the future.

"…we still have time to think of alternative plans."

With a pensive look on his face, Tasuku gave an unclear answer. Perhaps he was only able to answer this way from speculating about what I said.

I nodded, it was impossible to expect an immediate reply, rather, it was good luck that Tasuku didn't refuse him right out.

Maybe he wasn't very suitable as a noble, but he's very likeable as an individual. Erika had probably inherited her gentleness from him.

"It's fine if you can't answer me right away, you can ignore me or prepare alternative plans, but you absolutely must prepare the uniform in time so I can add the alteration I need."

"I will arrange it immediately, but honestly I'd rather not help send you to certain death. "

“If that really is how you think, then do as you wish as long as you don’t disturb me, bastard.”

“Good grief… I guess I can’t stop you, Harold-kun. You know I can’t help but be amazed at how dazzling your youth is, but I also can’t help but be worried about you as my future son.”

What sly and embarrassing things is this old man saying?! Any bitter impressions I had left of him vanished the moment he referred to me as his ‘son’.

“…are you insane? Don’t you remember that I’m going to annul my engagement with Erika?”

“That kind of matter is only possible if both parties agree, don’t you think? Although if that is the final decision the two of you come too, I will respectfully accept your choice.”

That’s surprising, I thought that he would eagerly annul it for Erika’s sake, but apparently not.

Well, if he’s going to respect Erika’s intentions, then the engagement will naturally revoke itself in time, so I guess it doesn’t matter.

“Anyways, isn’t it about time you started calling Erika by her name? Since the day you met, whenever you called her by name you would always used the ‘-san’ suffix.”

(No, no, I don’t really need to… do I?)

The thing is, despite what he said, I can’t recall a time I ever called Erika directly by her name at all. I’d always refer to her as ‘bastard’ or ‘you[1]’, and even when I was referring to her when she wasn’t in the vicinity, I’d always use ‘that person[2]’. Although I don’t refer to others by name often, I don’t think I’ve ever referred to Erika by name at all.

Well, I guess that’s what happens when you try to avoid someone.

It’s been three years since we’ve first met, and I haven’t even called her by name once. It’d be too awkward to start doing now.

“…that’s idiotic.”

Even though my mouth had said that, maybe it really would be better to start calling her by name.

Well, whether this idea will actually be put into practice is another story.

Translated by KuroInfinity.

[1] – (アイツ or “Aitsu”)

[2] – (コイツ or “Koitsu”)

Chapter 18

(Harold's POV)

I can't exactly say that I'm ready, but I'm not going to get any more time no matter how frustrated I am. In the end, I wasn't able to think of any contingency plans and had to request Tasuku's cooperation.

Even if I claimed that this expedition was a trap, I wouldn't be able to fully convince him unless I was able to present firm evidence. If there's anything else that I should do in preparation, then I should probably warn Cody to be cautious.

There's not really any point in doing so, though.

We were proceeding at the rate of horses that had their reins tugged while they were pulling a carriage full of rocks over a rocky area. I could swear that this craggy path was making my feet heavier somehow.

"Use the muscles in your shoulders more, Harold. I know you can do it because the muscles you use to keep your face stiff all the time must be at least five times stronger!"

Maybe I looked more stressed out than I thought, because Sid, who was walking beside me, decided it would be fun to tease me a bit.

Everyday since the first day of the expedition, without fail, Cody's unit had continued to say things of a similar sense to me time and time again. Perhaps they thought I was nervous, with this being my first assignment and all, and they were just trying to help me relax.

Though there was no doubt that I was nervous in a different sense.

Unfortunately, my various remarks such as "Be careful, don't grow negligent" or "Watch your surroundings" were all overlooked by the lack of tension. The majority of the veterans such as Robinson saw the expedition as a low-risk campaign that we shouldn't worry about.

Sometimes I wonder if I should've been more thorough with my preparations, but I still have plenty of time left. In a bad way, there wasn't any tension in the air at all.

"You bastards are taking this too lightly. If a battle starts, you'll be the ones to die first."

"Who would we be fighting?"

"From the patrol guard on the border, they've reported sightings of men who might be spies from the Empire.

"Well I guess that's something to be wary of, but if they're a reconnaissance team, they'd only thirty people at most. While we're numbering a little over two-hundred, even if a battle were to start, we'd be able to resolve it easily enough."

I'm not sure what answer I should give Sid, because I know this isn't going to be some small skirmish.

It's only natural that a thirty-person unit specialized in reconnaissance would die in vain against a fully supplied and equipped opponent in enemy territory. So there's no way any veteran from the Order would conclude such a battle happening.

But that's only the case if the prior information was true. There's a high chance that things will take a turn for the worse from that premise.

Originally it's supposed to be a battle where many casualties are supposed to appear, it's more than likely that there's going to be ambushes and other surprises waiting for us in the forest.

I wonder how Sid could be so calm and composed yet still meet his demise at the hands of Larry Cloud.

While thinking about such dark things, I swore that I'd stab a metal nail through him before that happens.

If possible, I'll crush any chance of that meeting happening so that Sid can return home.

“If you don’t want to die, then you should prepare yourself to be battle-ready at any moment. Well, a bastard like you already knows that, no?”

“Yeah~ Yeah~”

It seems like Sid, who had gotten used to my crude remarks, kept pushing for goodwill.

I want to warn them of the future that awaits them, but there’s just not enough evidence, instead of getting them to believe me, I’m only cultivating unnecessary distrust and suspicion.

At the very least, I tried to plant a sense of crisis in their hearts to no avail, and before I knew it, we had arrived at a town nearby the Blitz Forest. While staying there we were assigned to patrol the forest.

(Ah… what am I supposed to do?)

Having arrived in the evening, and that the preparations for the next day were already completed, I decided it would be nice to try exploring the city dyed in the setting sun.

Considering the time, there wasn’t very many people in the streets. Well, I guess it wasn’t a very big town in the first place.

Even if you walk absentmindedly while brooding over a problem, you won’t bother anyone on these deserted streets. Unbeknownst to myself, I had walked into a back alley by accident, most probably because I had directed most of my resources towards thinking.

Then my feet stopped.

When my thoughts had returned to me, I came to realize how lost I was. I had no idea where I had walked from.

‘Just what am I doing?’ I thought to myself, amazed. In such a dark alley, I caught myself from voicing those thoughts aloud.

“…that’s far enough. Just how long do you plan to keep tailing me?”

I put a lot of pressure into my voice, even though it looked liked I was speaking to myself.

However, at that moment multiple personages appeared from the space that previously housed noone. Their figures were covered completely in black, as if to melt into the dusk, reminiscent of ninjas.

To be surrounded by such an eerie group, my alertness level had risen to its maximum in an instant, even though I wasn't sure if they were the enemy or not.

But contrary to my expectations, the ten black figures didn't move. Then, one of them stepped forward and removed the cloth that had previously hidden everything except for their eyes.

"It has been quite some time～ Harold-sama～"

That drawling voice of hers didn't fit the tension. Although her wardrobe had changed considerably from the cook's apron she was wearing before. The person before me was definitely Yuno, Erika's attendant.

A strong sense of relief swept through my body now that I knew that they were allies instead of enemies, releasing the tension.

"A message from Tasuku?"

"Yes～"

After fierce negotiations I was somehow able to gain Tasuku's assistance. I'm really grateful to know that he dispatched human resources for me as promised.

But why send me Yuno? This is clearly a heavy burden for Yuno, who doubles as a maid.

Or maybe the reason why she serves as Erika's escort is *because* she's that skilled, a brilliant way to keep a skillful personnel hidden.

"Well, I guess I'll forgive you bastards for that greeting earlier."

“Yes～ By the way～ Erika-sama told me to ‘Do as you will’～”

(Huh?)

What Yuno just told me didn’t register. You would think that someone who was in a master-servant relationship with Tasuku and Erika wouldn’t talk about themselves that lightly.

Those words were akin to her saying ‘I’m here because I wanted to come here’.

I had just learned something astonishing, but I couldn’t afford to think about such things right now.

“Hmm, well, it’s fine. Have you bastards heard anything new?”

“Somewhat～” Yuno slurred ambiguously.

Although this place was uninhabited, it probably wasn’t the best place to disclose this information.

You never know where ears are lurking.

“If that’s so, let’s move to a secure location, and disclose the details there.”

“Over here～ We’ve prepared a private room that’s out-of-sight～～”

As expected, Tasuku did his job thoroughly.

In response to Yuno’s words, the other black figures melted into the shadows, once again disappearing into the darkness. Does that mean that Yuno will be my guide?

When I turned to Yuno and saw her face, I couldn’t help but feel soothed by her smile.

Towards her, I silently prayed that she’d help support me when I needed it.

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(Cody’s POV)

It's already been three days since we arrived at the Blitz forest. While performing our duties as a support force, I may have kept up my usual attitude on the surface, but the truth was that my heart felt like it was in the middle of a storm.

The reason for this discord was the boy, Harold, who had just recently joined my unit.

I'm monitoring Harold due to the request of Vincent, the Knight's Second-in-Command, who also happens to be my old friend, but it's not a pleasant thing to doubt your own men.

If Harold had only one mysterious point to be doubted, then this wouldn't be so awkward.

Originally, what caught my eye was his overwhelming fighting ability, but my doubts became clear with our run-in with that mysterious red-black mist that we encountered during the exam.

An unidentified monster. Harold's response was one that could have only been made if he knew something about that foggy monster.

He insisted it was just intuition and acted as if it was the first time he ever saw it, but that was obviously proven a lie judging by how he fought that thing.

If Vincent hadn't asked me to do this, and I didn't have these doubts of mine, then maybe I could've overlooked this mystery.

There might not be any detrimental effects to The Order by doing this, but why go about it in such a roundabout way?

(The "Crimson-black fog" I really hope that you don't know anything about it, Harold.)

I can't fathom his reasons why.

I don't even know what that reddish fog is in the first place, but if I can clarify the identity of that mist, there's a chance I'll be able to see the true meaning to Harold's actions.

But I can't say something with leisure now, whether or not he fights

on the side of the Knight Order or the mysterious monsters, Harold knows fully well that he's been telling information that's impossible for ordinary people to know.

When he was informed about his participation in the expedition, he was clearly displeased.

And from the moment that the expedition started, whenever he opened his mouth he'd let out repeated remarks akin to "Prepare for battle."

As if 'he knew' that there was a need to do so.

Besides, I can't help but feel anxious whenever I can't see his figure when I return to town.

I can't wipe away that bad feeling of mine. Sure, members tend to grow nervous when being sent out on their first mission, but I know that Harold isn't just some little boy.

I'll never be able to calm my heart if I can't even calm my mind.

As I've understood it, I'm worried about Harold's persistent remarks.

Should I purposely spread what I know? I don't think Harold will come clean, but if this is a crisis that involves lives, this may be the choice I have to make to protect my subordinates.

(But… Harold is an important subordinate of mine too, right?)

This was my unwavering conviction, but at the same time it was the idealism that troubled me.

I know that Harold isn't as bad a kid as he appears to be, now that I've been in close contact with him for several months. He seems to be keeping some secret, but he hasn't done anything detrimental to the Order so far.

I want to believe in Harold, it's only natural to feel that way as his supervisor.

I'm believing in him because I want to believe in him, but I can't talk about it. This unconditional trust of mine is equivalent to blind fool's.

I exhaled a long, *long* sigh.

Just thinking about it makes it more complicated.

Having said so, maybe I should just walk up to Harold one day and say "Hey there, morning Harold-kun, is there anything you're hiding from me you want to talk about?"

There's always the chance that he'll spill everything due to being seen through.

I immediately purged the thought, there's no way that would work!

However, it might not be a bad idea to talk to him sometime. We might not have another chance if something happens during the patrol mission.

And when I tried heading out to meet with Harold, a messenger burst in with the momentum to break down the door.

"There's a report that a patrol duty unit is being attacked by someone! There are numerous reports of injuries! They are requesting immediate assistance!"

Each commander started moving with the message, but I was the one to move the fastest.

As I opened the door to the room housing my Unit, there should be twenty people including Harold.

"It's time for work! Tell everyone to gather outside, and Robin-kun-"

"Y-yes?!"

"Where's Harold-kun?"

"He was here just a little while ago…"

I'm too late, he's probably already heading over to the scene.

My intuition told me so.

"From here on out the Cody-unit will follow the instructions of the Maric-unit! I'll be looking for Harold-kun, so I'm counting on you!"

"C-captain?!"

I ran out without listening to Robin's voice, and went to check the stables first. I didn't hear of anybody borrowing a horse, and their numbers didn't seem to decrease.

Harold may have thought that a rookie member didn't have the authority to borrow an emergency horse.

In other words, Harold decided to run to the Blitz forest on his two feet, I should be able to catch him if I use a horse.

I, who had just borrowed a horse made a beeline straight to the forest. Within five minutes, I was able catch sight of Harold's back.

Even so, what amazing leg strength. It took more time than expected to catch up.

Slowing down the horse, I jumped off and stood in front of Harold.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Harold-kun?"

"…bastard, what are you doing?"

"You mean with Robin and the others? I left their command to the other teams."

"Go back. You may be a bastard, but you're their captain."

"If that's what you want, then why don't we return together?"

"I refuse."

Rejecting my offer to return, Harold decided to work alone.

He has no idea the consequences this could bring, ignoring the

command of a superior officer and acting selfishly to his own plan.

Moreover, if he intervenes with the battlefield, he won't be able to avoid punishment. It'll be beyond the range that I can protect him from. At worst, he'll be discharged and imprisoned.

But I guess that means the reason why he has to go is that important to him.

The boy named Harold will never bend his own beliefs. He has the strength to make anything he intends reality.

I can't persuade him with just words.

'Why do I have to have such a stubborn subordinate?' I thought with a bitter smile.

"Do you really expect me to return by myself?"

"I don't care, just go already!"

"And here I'm telling you I can't do that! Do you really want to be convicted as a criminal that badly?!"

And that's only the case if he survives.

Just by looking at Harold eyes, you could tell how displeased he was. They were the eyes of someone resolved to dive into the jaws of death.

I've seen so many people that have had those eyes to the point that it's unreasonable, and more than a few of them are dead.

"…"

"Are you sure? Do you really want me to say this?"

There's no way I can send someone with such eyes to the battlefield.

Although Vincent may be suspicious of Harold, I'm different. When I first saw Harold, I could see it.

The figure of Harold standing as a great knight that leads others.

Some might say this is my selfishness speaking, and they're right. This is me working for my ideals.

I know that Harold has the potential to reach heights that neither I nor Vincent will ever be able to achieve.

Still, I don't want to die.

I took in a deep breath, I can't afford to hold back in this fight, no matter what.

Unsheathing my sword, I realized I was doing something that I might not be able to handle myself.

Letting out my usual laugh with vigor, I declared,

"If you really want to get past here that badly, you'll have to go through me first! …got it?"

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

Chapter 19

(Cody's POV)

My evaluation of people can't be said to be very flattering, but by being an individual capable of achieving a position as captain at a young age, that much should be fine, that is what it means to be one that walks the path of the elite.

However, in addition to having a bad attitude in general, my work attitude couldn't be considered serious at all, resulting in some friction to form between my colleagues who couldn't accept my personality.

The origin of that personality forming can be dated back to the friendship between myself and the boy that would one day be known as the Knight's Deputy Captain, the one who's admired by everyone.

Born and raised in the same rural village, we were so-called childhood friends.

We both lived in common households and spent our early childhoods surrounded by nature, it was very peaceful life.

…and that peace was shattered when we were seven years old.

Out of nowhere, the village was attacked by bandits, the people that we grew up knowing, killed or abducted. The food and money we had saved up, plundered.

But that wasn't enough was it? Monsters swarmed in from everywhere, the barrier that once protected us destroyed during the pillaging. They probably caught the smell of the blood and food.

It was impossible for us to prevent the monster invasion when we couldn't even exercise our defense measures properly.

The smell of blood and the screams of the people echoed throughout the town as we were attacked by wave after wave of bandits and monsters, flames burning everywhere. It was hell.

Although Vincent and I were somehow able to survive the onslaught, I lost my family and the town had been destroyed to the point of being irreparable.

There was nothing left for us other than an inevitable sense of despair. For us two orphans, there was nothing we could do other than be sad.

If that was the case then we might as well die, right? The me of that time seriously considered that option. How could I stay alive while the rest of my family was dead…

But then I remembered, Vincent was still by my side, how the hell could I leave him all alone? He was small, a crybaby, and my best friend. The same friend who hid behind me all the time because he was shy. I had to live on.

I at least wanted Vincent to live if I had to die.

But if I died, a boy as vulnerable as he was wouldn't last very long.

Well, even if I said that, we were still just children. The chances of us both surviving were low from the start.

Still, there was no way I could abandon Vincent and choose death.

So that's why I asked him, "I don't care whether I live or die any more, but what about you? Do you want to die together with me or live on?"

"…I want to live. I don't want to die… it's scary…!"

That was Vincent's answer, even in a situation like that he was too afraid to die.

To be honest, I couldn't understand that feeling of his very well, I honestly thought that the easiest way to escape my despair at that moment was death.

But for his sake, I thought it was fine. I knew that to choose such a path even after seeing his determination would only make me a coward.

In truth, maybe it was the strength that Vincent showed at that moment to choose life over death that saved me at that time. Without it, I probably would've chosen death at that place.

At that moment, the two of us stood up, our hands clasped together. We had come to an agreement that didn't need words to be understood.

The two kids who had no one to depend on did everything they could to survive.

In the place that was our hometown just a few days ago, we pillaged corpses and fields for food, we stole from people for money, and in the slums that were now our home, we even killed people in self-defence.

It almost felt like we were slaughtering the monsters that attacked us.

Running through such death and despair, at the age of ten we began to mimic mercenaries, marching off to battlefields to engage in the suppression of monsters.

Cowardly Vincent and I were steadily getting stronger, and it was around that time we started to see the changes.

Vincent had a surprising talent for the sword, and every time we went off to battle, I could feel us growing stronger and stronger.

We didn't live life to the fullest, we lived every day to just live another day. It really was a terrible life.

Before I knew it, Vincent stopped laughing or crying, I didn't want to see my friend like this.

I guess someone *did* die at that time, someone that was actually happy. I started to think so around this time.

After about three more years of working as a mercenary, I received a minor wound due to a lack of concentration in a middle of a battle. Although it wasn't life-threatening, it was impossible for me to continue the battle with such a wound.

But when you're in the middle of a war, nobody cares about such things. My opponent at the time saw that as an opportunity and raised his sword.

I didn't have the power nor intention to avoid that blow at that moment.

The sword swung down towards my eyes as I waited for my life to end, but right before the blade reached me, the flash of two swords swept by.

The first sliced my opponent's arms off while the second cleaved into his waist, ending his life without even giving him time to scream.

With blood dripping from his head from a wound he received earlier, Vincent turned back to look at me. The person dyed in blood in front of me and the person who I called my best friend looked completely different from one another.

Silently, he lent me his shoulder, and we withdrew to the safety zone. I was finally able to catch my breath.

"Cody, are you alright?"

"I am but… that's the first time *you've* had to protect me."

"…is that so? I see… well, it's not a bad feeling."

"Huh? What is?"

"The feeling of protecting my friend, I mean."

"…"

"They're so dirty… are we really supposed to protect people with hands as bloody as this?"

As he said so, Vincent clasped his fists. Was it in joy or regret I wonder? It was impossible for me to understand what he was feeling.

Even so, for Vincent to only be thinking of protecting another at such a time had to be a sign.

“Well, why can’t you protect them?”

“Huh?”

Vincent’s showed a stupid expression for a moment.

It was unbearably funny, but I forced myself to say what I could.

“If you join the Order, can’t you protect hundreds, no, thousands of people, and not just me?”

“How could vagrants like us ever join the Order…”

“Its unreasonable, but it’s nothing compared to the hardships we had to go through to survive so far.”

“Cody…”

“The hell Vincent, you’re clearly stronger than me, but I can’t be that weak.”

“W-what about our pasts?”

“That doesn’t matter! They won’t care about things that happened so early in our lives like where we were born and raised! … probably.”

“…”

“Choose Vincent, will you keep living as you do now, or will go ahead and join the Knight Order?”

“…it’s just like that time.”

At that time, I asked him whether he wanted to live or die in front of a devastated town.

If I recall correctly, it had already been six years since that time.

“Cody, I want to change this world where the weak are stepped on

by the strong.”

“Change the world… Hey, you’re making a big deal again.”

“I can’t do it alone though, there’s no way I could achieve this dream without your power.”

“The knights aren’t exactly my thing though. I don’t really want to be above people, and I’m lazy.”

“Even so, I want to do this with you. A place where children like us will never appear again, I want to make that kind of world.”

“…you’re going to be the death of me.”

“Don’t worry about giving me your answer now, give me your answer after we finish this fight.”

While leaving me with the relief staff, Vincent immediately returned to the front lines.

Gazing at his back, for the first time in my life, my little friend who always hid behind me, had taken steps in front of me to chase his own dreams. I always thought I was the one protecting him, but even if I wasn’t next to him, I sure that Vincent had the ability to make it.

But surely that doesn’t mean…

He said with a serious face that he’d change the world, and as I thought of that, I couldn’t help but find myself laughing.

With each laugh, my stomach hurt but I still didn’t stop laughing.

“If I’m with this guy, will my life ever be okay?”

My misunderstanding that I understood as I looked at Vincent’s back that day as he ran towards the front lines has been engraved into my mind forever.

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(Even if his mouth says so, there's no way Harold could really mean that judging by his appearance)

That's why I'm standing in front of Harold now.

There's no reason or basis as to why, there was only a feeling and intuition that I had to do this.

Harold looked exactly like Vincent did.

A boy who had succumbed to absurd dreams.

Oh, I'm the worst. Without even considering Harold's feelings I'm trying to help him one-sidedly.

Worrying about him, when he doesn't want to be worried about.

Such a selfishness as if I were entrusting my own daughter and best friend to Harold. I will take him back even if I have to beat him down to do it.

I pulled my sword out and took my stance as the sound of sharp metal rang out.

I always wondered what Harold would be like if he fought seriously. Speed, technique, magical prowess, Harold is far above anyone in the same year as himself.

Although I was able to channel my fighting techniques into avoiding attacks with somersaults, swift kicks would deftly follow, aiming for my hands that I used for balance to cripple my movement.

It was a way of fighting where you wouldn't be able to predict where the attack would come from. An extremely difficult technique to pull off.

But I can't allow myself to be defeated here.

I asked Harold as we exchanged blows at high speed.

"Harold, what are your dreams for the future?"

It was a question with truly no context at all.

But Harold returned my words without being particularly upset.

“I live for myself, that’s it.”

A brief answer that he lived for himself.

The exact opposite of Vincent who chose the path of protecting others.

But for some reason, I couldn’t help but feel they were similar.

“Well then, here’s another question: Have you ever thought of making friends?”

“Such things are unnecessary.”

To avoid getting hit with the kick that he threw out during the exchange, I backed off a bit.

Without making a fatal blow, I have to finish the fight. I have to win without hurting him too badly.

“Don’t you have anything you want to do?! You should make use of your life to leave a legacy behind for others to follow!”

“Those are just the words of the weak!”

I won’t deny it. In the first place, humans are weak creatures. So we flock together and seek connections.

It’s fine because we’re human, we can be weak.

We can support, be supported, connect with others and be strengthened.

But Harold cuts everything down. He tries to become strong himself without believing in anyone other than himself.

It’s too lonely. I can’t imagine how much we ordinary people would have to cut down to obtain his strength.

Harold has been walking a path that was different from Vincent and I. Perhaps he's still only halfway down his road.

I don't know what his goal is, but he won't stop. Not until his life is exhausted.

Even so, even if the circumstances were different, even if the place you're aiming for is the exact opposite of what we were.

That appearance of yours that's trying to resist the world overlaps with the Vincent who intends to change the world in an impossible way.

So I have to help you.

"A world where children like us will never appear again."

Because that is the oath I made with Vincent that day.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

Chapter 20

(Harold's POV)

While holding the sword, I asked myself.

Why did Cody pursue me? It's because I was a member of his squad and I left.

Why do I have to fight Cody? It's because he aims to bring me back with brute force.

In other words, all of these are things that were caused by my actions, this is my fault.

Although I assumed that somebody would try to obstruct me for taking action myself in an emergency, this is close to the worst situation possible for Cody himself to chase after me.

More importantly, Cody isn't near Robinson right now. Even if they got caught up in a battle, I thought that if Cody was in the vicinity then that would be able to help to some extent.

This is truly not the ideal situation, it was like I was reinforcing Robinson's death flag instead of destroying it.

Now that I've taken this moment in, I can't waste any more time here.

I need to get through this quickly so I can meet up with Yuno and continue the plan, but it doesn't look Cody will allow that too easily.

Even if I take advantage of my speed and make a huge number of attacks, all of my strikes that I thought were aimed at blind spots are prevented as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

That said, if I forego attack and focus on defense, a sudden outburst of sharp blows will ensue. Although it's still at a level that can be avoided, even the smallest waver in concentration could prove fatal.

As expected of a character who regularly joins the hero's party, albeit limitedly.

What's even more troubling is that the weapon that Cody is using is different than what he uses in the original work. A longsword of the Order. Far different than the fighting style I knew.

In the original work, Cody used different equipment, his Willow Katana and a Bow and Arrow.

Although it's doubtful that such a combination could actually be useable in real warfare, in the game you could instantly change between equipment to respond to both close and long range battles.

The current Cody is using a longsword and magic. It might sound easy to beat in the game, but all of my attacks are being perfectly dealt with. I can't grasp a single clue to what strategy I should take.

Perhaps Cody won't attack me of his own volition and stay on defense to buy time and hold out until reinforcements arrive.

If so, then I'm checkmated.

Even if I try to escape by fully utilizing my speed, he'll just catch up to me again by using his horse.

In that case, I have to take him down here as quickly as possible.

I released a spell as I started growing more impatient.

"<<Trident Blitz!>>"

With a clap of thunder, the three bolts of lightning arc in a spiral towards Cody.

A bolt of lightning that would easily incapacitate an ordinary person. However, Cody wasn't stupid enough to take the lightning for no real reason at all.

"<<Flame Column!>>"

Still, I continued to fire my magic.

This time, huge pillars of flame emerged at his feet, but with a quick leap backwards, his appearance disappeared behind the fire pillar.

Immediately after, the fire pillar was dispersed as if it were nothing.

“Oh, how scary, <<Wind Fang!>>”

The magic he had cast was a light one.

Wind Fang was originally an invisible spell, but it clung to the remnants of the flame and shot directly towards me, faster than ever.

I decided it’d be better to go straight with magic defense rather than avoid it.

Commonly known as “R-guard”.

Activated when pushing the left and right arrow keys and square buttons for physical defense, while pressing the ‘R’ button to prevent magic damage while consuming MP.

Of course, there’s no way I’m actually holding a controller, so it’s not a technique that can be used as easily as pushing down multiple buttons at the same time.

At length, it’s the same thing as using magic. Form the image of a shield created out of magic power in my mind.

One suddenly manifested in front of me.

Colliding with the shield, the fangs released a large crackling sound before breaking down and disappearing.

There was no damage to myself.

But it was just a ploy to get me to stop moving, Cody had thrown away defense and started moving offensively.

I let out a groan as I blocked his sword strike. It was heavy, definitely stronger than what I could do.

Cody was pushing me back, and finally pushed me down, only to jump back unexpectedly, and quickly change back into a defensive stance.

I thought he was going to take me back by force, but I misread him. Cody doesn't want to wait for reinforcements, he fully intends to overpower me by himself, to make me admit defeat.

Is he that confident that he won't lose? Though in truth, I can't see how I can win.

Cody's not weak enough that he'll be beaten with just speed alone. I need something else.

(I'm going to lose at this rate…!)

I judged so.

Taking my distance to focus on long range attacks, I jumped and did a flip in the air.

"Guh…!"

Even though I was only doing this to build momentum with the sword, my bones still raised up squeaking sounds from the mere power I put in.

Despite this, I managed to shrug it off and swing the sword down with power generated by using my whole body.

"<<Grand Punisher!>>"

The ground rises up to flank Cody.

It was a spell that focused completely on power rather than speed, but that much was obvious.

I cast Grand Punisher again, my spells look like they'll hit dead on, the two hell-bent spells dead set on getting their prey, but Cody only brushed it aside like a joke.

"Do you really hate me that much? I'm shocked."

“Shut that stinking mouth of yours already!”

My visibility is obstructed as the magic is released in succession, releasing dust everywhere. The ground is left hollow as if someone dug it out, and the path looks so rough that you can’t even walk straight on it anymore. If I can’t make use of my speed, this is the only way I can win.

An idiotic plan almost akin to giving up any victory. A disadvantageous gamble.

If I tried to shorten the distance, the fight would start to tip in Cody’s favour.

That’s why I tried to keep my space, but even at a distance, it’d be dangerous to consume physical strength for no real reason at all.

I had no choice but to disable Cody like this, no matter how low the possibility.

But after a couple more exchanges of sword swings, I dropped my sword. As I was now, there was no way I could beat Cody.

“…are you done?”

“…yeah.”

However, that’s only the case if I was fighting him ‘one-on-one’.

“-it’s my win.”

I declared my victory despite the desperate situation I was in. Listening to my words, Cody dropped his sword and raised both his hands in surrender.

Behind him, there were three people completely covered in black clothes, with Yuno pressing knives against his neck and back.

“Isn’t it ‘our’ win~?”

“What are you mumbling about? You only came in at the very end.”

“I think Harold-sama should remember to praise people more straightforwardly～”

Yuno is exactly the same as always. Asking me to give her words of praise the next time she helps me.

At that moment, Cody, who was watching our exchange, burst out into laughter.

“What’s wrong? Did you hit your head too hard?”

“No, it’s just that you were all like ‘I don’t need any friends!’ so I never thought that you’d have someone out there to help you.”

Thinking about it, I did say that, didn’t I?

“Don’t you want friends?” he asked me, so I replied in half-rage “I don’t need any!” I wondered why he asked that, but it doesn’t really matter anymore.

“Did you do all those things because you didn’t quite understand those girls magic and concealment abilities?”

“It’s not just because of that.”

There was also the fact that during the battle I would shoot magic randomly in hope of Yuno noticing it.

According to the plan, some of the black-clothed people would tail the patrol guards, and if an anomaly were to happen, they’d immediately contact me so we could meet up at a place we decided beforehand.

Since the meeting place wasn’t too far away, I cast spells as a replacement for signal flares.

It was a hit-and-run game that required lots of luck, but it was somehow able to succeed due to Yuno being an insightful person.

“Tie him up already.”

“Please don’t resist too much, I don’t want to get rough～”

“Yeah yeah, the worst treatment, right?”

“Why don’t we just tie up his limbs and leave him here?”

“Isn’t that too much?! I don’t have a hobby of becoming monster food!”

Cody became my captive without much resistance.

Taking his weapon, we hung him who was tied up with ropes on a tree branch. There aren’t any large monsters that live around here, so at this height he won’t be in danger soon.

After a while, the Knight’s support unit should pass by to let him down.

We also tied the horse to the tree so that the could be found easily. He won’t be overlooked.

“What a comical figure, it suits you.”

“Are you just going to leave me here? What am I supposed to do while I wait?”

Even in his suspended state, Cody called out to me.

Apparently even looking like *that* hasn’t broken his spirit.

“A bastard like you still has a role to play out, but for now you can just be shaken by the wind.”

“A role?”

“You’re a captain, that’s the position you need to fulfill right now. Let’s go.”

I lost a lot of time, so after giving Cody those last meaningful words, I hurriedly made my way towards the meeting area in front of the Blitz Forest.

It took around two hours on horseback to get there, and I finally arrived at the entrance to the forest.

The situation was quickly explained to me by the black-clothed operatives that were working on reconnaissance.

“What’s the current situation?”

“Harold-sama’s expectation of the Sarian Army disguising themselves as the Star Aria Tribe seems to be correct. The Order and a mysterious group have begun conflict, and there have already been casualties.”

Casualties. That word seemed heavier to me when he said it.

If they just fought better, then they wouldn’t have died but it’s too late to have regrets.

I swallowed.

“However, there’s only so much one person can do.”

At that moment I remembered the words that Erika had said to me that day. Since I have the original knowledge, it’s necessary for me to throw away the expectation that all futures can be changed.

Because there’s no way I’m strong enough to carry everyone’s lives on my shoulders.

“We’ve also confirmed battle between the Sarian army disguised as knights of the Order and the Star Aria Tribe.”

“So the worst situation possible, how about the battle between the Order and the Star Aria Tribe themselves?”

“It seems that the Order has been successfully tricked, as they are now preparing to invade the Star Aria Tribe’s living area.”

“What are you going to do～?”

“As planned, I’ll expose myself to the Knights and the Tribe as a member of the Sarian Army and attract their attention.”

“Understood.”

“Everyone else will head around towards the Star Aria Tribe, you’ve memorized my instructions, right?”

“Of course～”

Now I just need to get my job done. My future greatly depends on how I overcome this crisis.

No, not just my future, but Cody, Ryner, and the Black-clothed group as well.

“…listen.”

I quietly opened my mouth.

Everyone’s eyes concentrated on me, as I gave them my own powerful look.

“You bastards are here because it was Tasuku’s order, and he told you to follow my command, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s exactly correct.”

Everyone nodded.

Its no good when you can’t separate your personal life from business. When I return alive, I made up my mind that I’d give him a good hit for “putting more burdens on my back.”

“That means the lives of you bastards are now in my hands, do you understand?”

“You want us to die for you, Harold-sama?”

“You bastards sure are stupid.”

I cut off that answer of theirs as idiotic.

It was somewhat amusing how puzzled every one of the black clothed group looked when I said that.

Then they should remember this. A weak heart is easily influenced, an easy kill for a bird of prey, so with a smile full of confidence and

sarcasm I said,

“The lives of you bastards now belong to me, so you are *not* allowed to die without my permission, understood?”

And so the curtain rises on the biggest battle I’ve ever experienced since coming to this world.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

Chapter 21

(Black Clothed A's POV)

"That was the boy we heard so much about?"

On the way to the settlement of the Star Aria Tribe, we were running side by side when conversation broke out.

"Yeah, that was definitely the boy the master[1] told us about."

He's very high-handed, or maybe arrogant?

It wouldn't have been easy for us to leave our lives to Harold, though that shouldn't be a surprise considering all the things we've heard about his personality beforehand.

However, in that last scene we saw that Harold is actually a young boy full of kindness, he just can't be honest with himself in front of people. Otherwise, I'm not sure if we would've been able to commit ourselves to this.

Receiving an emergency summons, I remember the day our lives were given to that boy.

Our master Tasuku had a mysterious expression plastered on his face, as if a large scale battle was expected to happen soon.

I've already risked my life many times on missions, but I don't hate orders like this.

Everyone could feel that the master wasn't his usual self. While thinking that, Tasuku began to explain the circumstances of the mission this time.

"This job is about a fight that will break out between the the Knight Order and the Star Aria Tribe, with the true culprit being the Sarian Empire. They're going to instigate the fight between the two groups."

"…why do you think the Imperials are behind this?"

“We’ve received information that in the confusion they’ll take the chance to capture members of the Tribe.”

Certainly, this would be a big deal if it’s true. If left unchecked, this could develop into a civil war.

However, something still felt off to me.

“Under such circumstances, wouldn’t it be better to send actual soldiers instead of a unit like us?”

“We don’t have enough evidence to confirm these claims so we can’t make any conspicuous movements. If it’s true, I would’ve preferred to avoid dispatching you as well. I wouldn’t want to risk anyone making the connection between your unit and the Sumeragi family.”

“You would send us despite the risk being so high?”

I just need to know, why?

To my inquiry, a bitter smile floated up on Tasuku’s face.

“…it’s not something to be proud off, but I’ve been taking a lot of things that belong to Harold-kun.”

Harold. That name sounds familiar to me.

The daughter of the Sumeragi family’s fiancé, Erika’s fiancé.

The information gathered on Harold after the engagement was announced wasn’t very good. Not a lot of people are willing to bless their engagement.

“Why is his name coming up here?”

“Harold-kun is planning on going to this battlefield alone to stop this fight.”

“…I can only think of that plan as reckless, I would advise him to stop.”

“That child will not stop. All by himself, that child has been fighting alone for a long time.”

Tasuku sadly murmured, it almost felt as if he were blaming himself when he said that.

He was trying to support Harold, a boy who was planning to cut ties with the Sumeragi Family. It wouldn’t be easy to convince people who were unaware of Harold’s true nature to help him.

“Why would you go so far for him?”

“…if you wish to learn the truth, then you must promise to keep this a secret. I, myself intend to take this knowledge to the grave, so you should talk among yourselves to see who is willing to leave their lives to Harold, though what I reveal to you must absolutely be kept from others.”

The temperature in the room felt like it just fell a few degrees. To the extent that I thought I could feel an incredibly intimidating feeling emanating from Tasuku.

A cold sweat fell down our cheeks as if we had just passed through a near death experience.

“We pledge our loyalty to our master.”

“Thank you. Well, who here knows the story about Harold killing his own servants?”

“We all know it.”

Harold’s wrongdoings had definitely been heard of by us spies. We all knew the story of him killing his servant.

It was a big reason why many of us are still opposed to his engagement, actually.

“In truth, he didn’t kill his servants. To the servants who were about to be executed by his parents, he saved them and took the title of murderer himself. The servant and her daughter are still living peacefully thanks to the gracious funding that Harold had provided

on their escape.”

Tasuku had just dropped on us an unbelievable story.

It’s always been said that Harold killed his servant three years ago when he was only ten years old. Truthfully, I did have my doubts as to whether a child could actually do that.

“Then why keep this a secret then? If you make this information public, you can silence all the people opposed to the engagement at once.”

“Harold doesn’t want that. He’d prefer the safety of the two girls he rescued and the title of ‘murderer’ rather than take praise and fame for himself.”

So this is why Tasuku committed himself to take this secret to the grave.

A ten-year-old boy made this decision… I can feel my chest tighten a little when I think about it.

Resolving himself to be despised by everyone who knew nothing of what he did, and still carry through with his choice.

…and besides, it was Harold who developed and offered us the antibodies for the miasma, and the LP farming method.“

“Is that true?!”

Everyone was shocked at this revelation.

The antibodies that were manufactured with the specific ingredients from Tasuku’s abrupt command. I can’t imagine how many people were saved by that drug.

Along with the revolutionary LP farming method, a new way of farming that had a great impact on the Sumeragi territory’s economic recovery.

Everyone in the Sumeragi territory sung praises to Tasuku for these things, ‘As expected of our lord’ we said.

There wasn't even a trace of Harold Stoke's name in there. We thought everything was done by Tasuku.

"Yet once again, he asked that his involvement was left unknown. To prevent his parents from becoming the main developers and exploiting the interest rights, for if such a case came to be, he predicted that not as many people would be helped as they are now."

Throwing away all these chances to be praised and the like, only to gain hate and infamy in return.

While protecting someone else in all earnest, he chooses to hurt himself instead. That may be in essence, what makes him Harold Stokes.

"It was Harold-kun who discovered this information. Even doing that alone was probably dangerous, yet he only asked me to 'prepare a military uniform of the Sarian Empire', but how could I do just that?!"

"…"

Now we understood why Tasuku cared about Harold so much.

Harold is already part of the Sumeragi family in his eyes, and the savior of the territory. They have an obligation to him that cannot be repaid.

And that very same boy was about to go into a battlefield alone to prevent a civil war.

"Harold-kun has gotten used to being alone. He's now someone who's very poor at relying on others, a very clumsy boy. Certainly, he has a foul mouth and an arrogant attitude, but in reality he's more gentle than anyone. I want to protect this child no matter what."

Tasuku's thought process was if Harold was actually his child.

If that was the case, then it's our job to make those thoughts reality. It's our obligation to answer the sincerity of the man named

Tasuku, and the Sumeragi territory he rules over.

“We accept your request.”

Everyone bows their head in unison.

For this dangerous mission that might cost us our lives, not a single person refused.

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(Harold’s POV)

I had already taken off the Order’s armour and replaced it with the Sarian Empire’s uniform. Weaving my way through the trees, I was moving through the roads that couldn’t even be called roads at high speed.

The black-clothed group was right behind me. I’m not sure how strong they were, but it was truly amazing how they could keep up with my speed.

(I was hoping morale would rise a little bit with what I said earlier but…)

Casting skeptical gazes at them, I thought about such things.

I know how late in the game we already are, but if possible I don’t want any of them to die.

Though there is a far higher chance of me getting attacked rather than them.

I started to organize the information I knew before we reached our target.

The Sarian Empire has about 150 people here. A hundred of them are engaged in battle with the Order near the interior of the forest, while the remaining fifty are attacking the Star Aria Tribe.

Their number are about five times more than the information that was given in advance, but to be frank it was much less than what I

expected. The Order has a little over two hundred dispatched this time. I thought that we'd have the numerical disadvantage.

This was the Kingdom's territory, it would've been difficult for them to dispatch a large number of troops here in secret.

Maybe this was the most they could do if they still wanted to be able to infiltrate us.

In addition, there were about 120 knights on patrol missions in the forest, and on top of that, they were divided into teams of fifteen. If guided individually, there's always the possibility that they'll run into the enemy by accident.

If so, even if it's not a great countermeasure, their disadvantages would be covered. They should be fine even in the event of a surprise attack.

And even though in the original work the Order is decimated and Robinson is destroyed, the mastermind-Justus's main goal is to capture members of the Tribe and spread the word that 'The Star Aria Tribe attacked the Knights'.

There's no real need to destroy the Order.

I wonder if Robinson was born under some unlucky star or something? To be forced into a scenario that he had to die.

Ideally I would like to settle this before the support group arrives, but I know that's impossible.

There's no choice but to accept that Cody will return to the front lines soon.

"…we're close."

Roars and screams entered into my ears. With every step forward they grew louder and clearer.

We had finally caught up to the first group.

"Everyone spread out! Scout out the surroundings while I draw

their attention!”

“Acknowledged!”

The figures of the black clothed group disappear into the forest while leaving words of consent.

Speaking in terms of pure stealth, their abilities far outclass mine.

If I can draw in the attention of both enemies and allies, then there’s no way they’d be caught.

I donned a leather mask that covers the lower half of my face, including my mouth and nose. It should go without saying that I’d run into trouble if my identity were to be exposed.

At first I thought I should wear a mask that covered my whole face, but I abandoned the idea because the reduced field of vision could prove fatal.

I was exposed to names of unknown colleagues who were conscious of sudden lightning strikes.

Taking a deep breath, I kicked at the ground to increase my speed.

To flaunt my existence as much as possible, I started firing magic towards the sky. Thunder clapped as lightning shot into the night sky, cutting down trees with it.

There were only men of the Order there, the Sarian soldiers were probably in hiding to prepare their long-range attacks.

This must have been another way for them to counter their numerical disadvantage.

“Wh-what’s that?!”

“Hey, over there!”

The knights turned to the place where their comrade pointed at while yelling, and there I was. Standing over them on a tree branch overlooking their unit.

I draw my sword to increase their alertness levels.

However, it's not enough. This alone won't make them conclude the enemy actually the Sarian Empire.

Showing off the blade, I do my best to play the part of a villain.

"Rejoice, knights of the Liberl Kingdom, you will now become the cornerstone for the Empire's glory!"

"What do you mean 'the Empire's glory'… don't tell me, are you here to start a war with us?!"

(How the hell did you interpret it like that?)

Right now I was dressed in the uniform of the Sarian Empire's military, and I didn't say anything about starting a war to expand territory or anything.

I wonder what would happen if I exposed the truth and just outright told them the Empire's plan to attack the Order while framing the Star Aria Tribe.

Though, I guess it's common sense if I think about it. If I don't do this properly, then I'll accidentally start a war between the Liberl Kingdom and the Sarian Empire.

Now that I realised such a possibility, I could feel a cold sweat break over me.

There was no way I could back out now though.

Besides, Justus has nothing to do with the Sarian Empire. If the series of events were to be revealed, there's the chance that Justus's involvement will be exposed.

I didn't think of the possibility of the genius running away by himself. I probably should've prepared countermeasures so that when the Empire was discovered as the perpetrators the Kingdom wouldn't react too strongly.

Then, I got an idea.

“There’s no need for dead men to know the truth.”

I’m a commander, I’m a commander, act like you’re a commanding the Sarian Army that’s waiting in ambush…

Even for the Sarian Army, I’m an enigma that they don’t know about. An irregular that suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

But if you see an Imperial soldier suddenly declaring an attack on the Order, you obviously know he’s one of the enemies.

Furthermore, if you look at the medal that was hung on my left chest, you’d see a lieutenant badge. To ignore my order would be the same as ignoring your commanding officer.

It’s my win if that’s how they interpret it.

“Open fire!”

And sure enough, it was my brilliant victory.

Immediately after I issued the command, arrows started flying in from all directions. The Sarian army had executed my order.

The knights dealt with protected themselves from the arrows in response, and fortunately, there were no dead or serious injuries among them yet.

Even the position of the hidden Sarian soldiers was revealed.

Around now the black-clothed group should be capturing the soldiers if they’re following the plan.

(Even if it’s only by one second quicker, finish this already! Seriously!)

Maintaining my distance so I could buy time, while carefully firing magic so I didn’t hurt anyone, I started crying out in my mind.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

1. They all refer to Tasuku as ‘Dan’na-sama(旦那様)’ which

means ‘Master’ but also means ‘Husband’.

Chapter 22

(Harold's POV)

The magic that the knights released towards me was a direct hit — or so I made it seem, before hiding my figure.

From behind my cover I could hear a voice cheering "You did it!", a standard 'you didn't really win' flag.

I was almost tempted to reveal myself again and say something like 'These kind of things are fun, aren't they?', if it wasn't such an idiotic thing to do.

"Still, it's not over yet, right?"

While steadying my breath, I cursed while saying so to myself.

I was somehow able to prevent that attack with the R-guard, but it wasn't perfect, and this is only the fourth battle.

I've been fighting fifteen-man platoons one after another as six black clothed guards follow me while capturing imperial soldiers.

The Order is tough. One-on-one I'm confident that in a hundred rounds of battle I can win a hundred times.

But each one of them has refined their offense and defensive capabilities to around the same level as Robinson and co. If they didn't, then all their team battle training that they did with Cody's unit would've been for naught.

If I could fight back, then it would've been different. It's hard getting through these battles while only sticking to evasion and defense.

"Harold-sama, we have completed the capture of the targets."

Finally, the report I was waiting for had arrived.

The black clothed group seems to have sustained injuries in this

battle. Seeing their figures, I swallowed the words I wanted to say.

They're doing the best they can, it would be a mistake to reprimand them now.

"…let's withdraw."

After this, it's time to start interrogating the captured soldiers.

I didn't have any special negotiation techniques or anything, but I didn't have to resort to violence either.

By using the Original Knowledge, I acted as though had gotten information from their comrades, and threatened them I had other ways of getting more information.

There wasn't enough time to interrogate all of them, so I chose the ones I thought would break the easiest, but five out of nine actually cracked pretty easily. I guess that they assumed that if they already had a traitor amongst them, then it wasn't so hard to betray their country themselves. There was no point in endangering their own lives to keep already exposed information secret.

Honestly, most of the information they gave me I already knew, so I didn't really care too much about it. The important thing was getting them to confess what they knew. This way we can get the soldiers to stand in testimony and avoid the persecution of the Star Aria Tribe.

Our main objective here today is to delay Justus' plan, even if it's only by a little.

However, as I thought about such things, bad news suddenly came in.

A black-clothed messenger came running in through the foliage.

"It an emergency! We have confirmed that the enemy has brought reinforcements in, their numbers have reached about two hundred, and they've begun an assault on the Star Aria Tribe's village!"

“Damn it! What’s the status of the battle?!”

Hearing that the imperial army would decide to use such blatant actions was outside my expectations, I needed information on the battle to assess the situation.

We had eleven black clothed personnel, including Yuno, on their way to the Tribe’s village. They were giving support to the Tribe’s members who would be fighting against the Sarian soldiers.

“We’re currently holding them off, but we can’t take much more! Their reinforcements are of Division Commander-class!”

I know. It was impossible for them to beat the Sarian soldiers, but if they could just hold out until I get there…

The personnel we have stationed there were just scraped up together at the last-minute, there’s no way for them to hold out if the enemy received reinforcements.

Moreover, to be hiding a unit of Division Commander class until now, there’s a chance that this might’ve been their goal from the very beginning. The fact that it’s led by a Division Commander only further rectifies that as the truth, since units led by any officer from Lieutenant General to Major General are usually used to fight on the front lines.

I wonder if this was Justus’ doing. A dark premonition was crawling up my spine.

There was a possibility, but there wasn’t enough time to think about it.

“Bastard, lead me to them. Keep us at a pace that’ll make it hard to be tailed so we can make it to the front lines of the battle.”

Still, there should be about a hundred knights there. Though that number should be cut a bit with some being incapacitated from injuries.

I would’ve preferred to have the Sarian soldiers eliminated in secret but it’s too late. If I don’t act now, Yuno could be killed.

In the worst case, the power of the relief team that Robinson is a part of will be necessary.

A bitter feeling was welling up inside me from how this was developing. I felt impatient, helpless even, at this sudden change.

I kicked at the earth again to increase my speed.

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(Yuno's POV)

I've been wondering for a long time.

That moment when Erika found out about Harold's true intentions three years ago… was Harold truly not aware that Erika was hiding in the room?

I don't think that Harold, who was aware of me spying on his training, would overlook Erika hiding nearby. Just the other day, he even detected our presence that we tried so hard to conceal that evening.

It can't be a coincidence. He would've been more careful with what he talked about if he wanted to keep what he said a secret. Therefore, it's only natural for me to think that Harold leaked that information on purpose.

I can't read his true intentions, which only strengthens my reasons to doubt him.

Thinking about it, maybe Harold *wanted* me to grow suspicious of him from the very beginning.

Because it was that very suspicion that led me to eavesdrop on his discussion with Tasuku at that time.

Perhaps even that information was released only because Harold intended to do so.

The moment the words "Star Aria Tribe" left his mouth, my entire

world was shaken.

At that moment, all of Harold's actions which I felt were suspicious until now, all became connected by a single line.

He might've known about my true birth and past. That of a half-breed who was abandoned soon after birth, someone whose life couldn't even considered 'humane' anymore…

Harold cannot be measured with common sense, for if he could, I wouldn't be so surprised.

What if he knew everything and led me here on purpose?

(Maybe I should be grateful…)

I can bear tears from how happy I am now. If I wasn't saved by the Sumeragi family all those years ago, it would've been impossible for me to live like this.

But there was still one thing I regretted when I left my previous life.

Even if they didn't mean anything to me, even if it was for a job, I took the information of where the Star Aria Tribe lived and sold that info without hesitation to a man who would exploit them. I still have nightmares about it even now.

As a result, the hidden village of the Tribe was destroyed.

For selling out my home, I received a meager pay that was barely worth anything, and when I looked into what happened, I learned that many children and youth had died in what ensued.

I am one of the worst human beings, I won't deny it. I have the consciousness to accept that much.

After entering the Sumeragi Family, I went and visited orphanages whenever I had spare time, and began to provide support to help the lives of all the children there. It was one of the only ways a criminal such as myself could atone for what I did.

But those thoughts didn't disappear. Selling myself as a beast only

to serve others, I truly wondered what was the point of being alive…

Then I heard the news of how the Knights and the Tribe were going to get caught up in a huge battle, and Harold's plan to stop it.

This was something I never would've found out unless I suspected him, and there's no way I could've ignored this.

I went straight to Tasuku afterward and asked him, begged him for permission to join the personnel that was to be dispatched. Erica, who knew about my past sent me off with mixed feelings since she knew the danger of the mission.

"Make sure you come back, okay?"

Erica's words were so cheerful that it was hard for me to notice any difference from her usual behavior.

This is the place I truly belong, I really felt it at that time.

(Those two are surprisingly similar, aren't they?)

I thought about such memorable things in a haze.

Erica, who pushed me to come back alive.

Harold, who ordered me not to die without his permission.

I'm so sorry that I can't follow through with your words.

Erika will surely cry.

I don't know how Harold will react though, maybe he'll just laugh it off sarcastically like usual? It almost felt natural, in a way.

Perhaps Harold had grasped signs of this raid incident happening while he had his suspicions about me three years ago. I feel like that's the case.

I was probably just moving in the palms of his hands, securing the foundation of them.

At least I'll fulfill my role in them to the end. This is the only way for me to atone for my past.

I held myself, doing my best to put power in my limbs as I glared at my opponent, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't move my arm for some reason.

"What's with that rebellious look of yours? You don't seem to understand the situation."

Standing before me was a giant of a man, wrapped in gorgeous armor that was decorated with gold. An unnecessary decoration for the battlefield.

The men standing around him were probably his subordinates.

Opposing him was myself and one other member of the black clothed group. Everyone else had already been struck down.

This battle had grown into a hopeless situation.

The giant approached while cracking his neck, and pulling a large sword from its sheath.

"I don't know if you have some hidden spell or something to stay that cocky, but with those hands of yours like that, it'd be best for you to just give up resistance now and accept a quick death."

The giant, who until now overpowered us by using magic that we couldn't possibly cast, decided to use a much simpler and easier weapon for the finishing blow.

There's no way for me to survive if I were to be slashed with that. Far from a flesh wound, I'd be cleaved into pieces.

"…I can't do that~ …because I have a mission that I was told I had to fulfill until my last moments~"

"How admirable. Now return to dust."

And so the giant's sword descended on me at full force.

But the attack never reached me. Right before it happened, someone got in between myself and the sword at a speed that almost felt like teleportation.

For a moment, I couldn't understand what had just happened, that I had just been protected. Stunned, his name unconsciously fell from my lips.

"Harold… sama…"

His timing was perfect, as a shield for the weak, this was truly the way heroes were supposed to be.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

A/N: I might change this, but maybe not.

Chapter 23

(Yuno's POV)

"They keep springing up one after the other…"

The words of the big man stopped, his gaze turning toward's Harold, or more precisely- his uniform.

The Crimson military uniform he was wearing clearly belonged to the Sarian Imperial Army.

"Are you a Sarian soldier? Why stop me?"

"Ha~ If you really think that I'm your ally in this kind of situation where I'm *obviously* against you. Your brain must really be tiny in comparison to your gargantuan figure."

Harold's pre-emptive attack, "foul-mouth" was released. At any rate, it was the same as usual, but it was only at times like these that it was actually reliable.

The nose of the man he just laughed at flared.

So as to not miss that opening he gave, Harold pushed him back from their conspicuous position and threw out an intense kick against the upper-half of his armour.

Although it didn't look like he did much damage, the man who didn't expect such a kick retreated backwards while staggering.

"…did they die?"

He asked me without turning his eyes away from his opponent. He probably saw their bodies on the ground as he ran here.

"I don't know if they're dead or alive, but they're seriously injured."

This was a dangerous place to stop and think, surrounded by enemies on every side, it doesn't look like we have a good chance of surviving here.

Despite that, his response was insensitive no matter how you looked at it.

“Is that so?”

Three words, that was it.

But there was a silent yet definite undertone mixed in there.

He threw some recovery items towards me, this was the medicine we prepared for healing wounds and recovering magic power.

“Do you know healing magic? Heal as many people as you can, even if you have to use it all, and that guy over there isn’t really dead, just give him a good slap.”

“…you really are something, aren’t you~?”

I took in Harold’s figure while responding with an unusually light tone, surprising even myself.

There were lacerations in some places, while some parts of the already deep red military uniform had been darkened and discoloured, blurred from his blood.

They weren’t light injuries, and yet, he still didn’t intend to use the recovery items for himself.

Silently moving behind the scenes, only expressing his true feelings in funny ways like this.

“I told you bastards that you weren’t allowed to die without my permission, and I don’t remember giving you permission.”

Now that was a strict boss. There was probably no personnel in the world that would be able to satisfy him. Severely strict to all others, he was definitely the incarnation of a Spartan.

…and yet despite the situation we were in, I could feel a bitter smile growing on my face.

“Wake those guys up from their pitiful state already, or I’ll crush

them while they're on the ground."

"Sure, right away… is what I'd like to say, but it's kinda hard for me to withdraw right now, you know?"

Although the number of soldiers led by the general is light, they still have at least thirty people. It wouldn't be realistic to break through such an encasement with numerous injured people in tow.

My conclusion can't be considered a mistake.

However, that would only be the case if the exceptional existence known as Harold wasn't here.

"I never expected a bastard like you to do anything about them in the first place, I'll wipe out these annoying soldiers myself."

Harold just said something reckless.

He just announced that he'd take on over thirty enemies by himself. Not just me, but everyone here doubted their ears.

"As if you could do that, brat! Just try if you can!"

Harold's exhilarating remark could've only been seen as big words. Although he had hidden his face with a mask, it was easy to tell that Harold was only a boy from his voice and physique.

A grown man cannot possibly lose to a single child.

It was a legitimate allegation, a natural assumption, and a well-backed confidence.

But at the same time, it was a lethal arrogance.

"Oh, I planned to do so."

From my point of view, it was as if Harold had just disappeared, but immediately afterward a dull, metallic sound rang throughout the forest.

Harold's figure was still missing, but the ring of metal and the

sounds of screams continued to echo out from different directions.

He had grown a lot faster within the past few months.

The trees had grown thick so visibility was bad, but even if that was taken into account, my eyes couldn't keep up with him at all.

The soldiers who had surrounded me moments ago were now lying on the ground.

While amazed at the marvel happening before me, I quickly snapped back into reality.

Harold is using himself to open up a way and buy time, so I have to fulfill the role he gave me while I can.

There were some who were cut with swords, shedding blood, and those who were burned by flames, skin scorched black. I turned my head away from their unsightly figures.

While I still couldn't use my healing magic, I quickly started helping out two others by giving them first aid and making them drink the ether.

The battle which should've begun with an overwhelming advantage had begun to tilt in the other direction, making the frustrated general shout out,

"He's tough for a brat, so what?! Hurry up and get him already!"

"He's too fast! We can't keep up with hi-!"

The soldier was blown away while in the middle of saying something. The armour at his side was smashed to pieces, and he himself had fainted while convulsing.

It seems that even a sword can destroy armor if tempered well. The damage dealt to the insides of their bodies should be considerably high even though they weren't cut.

One enemy soldier had cut down ten men in an instant. The situation that should've been hopeless was taken care of in less than

a minute.

An enemy hero who bathed in darkness. Their enemy was the reaper or devil himself.

With the war situation changing at an unbelievable pace, the enemy general moved as his paralysis wore off.

“Then I’ll burn him to ash! ＜＜Flame Burst!＞＞”

There was a flurry of raging flames, and engulfed in those flames was Harold and a man who should’ve been his ally.

From somewhere I thought I heard someone say “Eh?”

I wasn’t certain if he actually did that. The enemy soldier might’ve said something, but it was all overshadowed by the whirl of flames. Perhaps he wasn’t even alive anymore.

The general had attacked Harold while harming his companions.

“…bastard, what did you just do?”

Harold, who had avoided the Flame Burst surprise attack, asked the general as he landed a ways away.

When I heard his voice, I felt as if my spine had been turned into ice.

Far from passionate, it was low, heavy voice that was unbearably calm. To me, it sounded like the calm before the storm.

“He was an incompetent piece of trash who couldn’t even catch you, is there any problem with killing those who can’t even serve as decoys?”

“No, it’s reasonable, delivering judgment to the incompetent is totally fine, because there’s nothing more troubling than having to watch over garbage.”

Harold praised the man’s inhumane actions. He unexpectedly agreed with the enemy general.

However, contrary to his words, Harold's eyes looked down on his much larger opponent.

"I'm not going to denounce it, what you said is the truth, you bastard. I despise my own inferiority."

Harold, who was willing to risk his life to help a dying comrade.

And the general, who killed an ally to get to his enemy.

As the person standing above, the difference was clear.

Harold, who looks at himself so disdainfully, must be disgusted with anywhere he looks, his patience exceeding its limits.

"It seems like you really want to die! Fine then! Imperial Army Major General, 'The Magician' swear on his name 'Ritzert', to cut you down!"

"Hah, you don't look like a magician with that figure of yours. Is that muscle you have there just for decoration? That's what those big swords you're carrying around are for, right? Well, it doesn't look like you're capable of using your head in battle much anyway."

At such a man – Ritzert's fury was like a gust of wind., yet Harold still said such sharp things, albeit briefly. The tension in the air seemed to stretch, and after a brief moment of silence, the wind ruptured as their battle began.

Ritzert was admired as a Major General. Adept with magic, there's no doubt that he earned the title with his skill.

Could Harold really win against such an opponent? Such anxieties grew in my chest.

If I had known about the outcome of this battle, I would've stopped Harold by force.

But there was no way for me to have known that.

I could only sit there and watch, as the cruel fate Harold had chained himself to began to unfold.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

Chapter 24

(Harold's POV)

I had just received the slash that was meant for Yuno, somehow I was able to make it in time, but my relief was short-lived after the figures of the black-clothed group entered my sight, all of them were gravely injured.

The scent of blood was in the air.

It was obvious who was the cause of this disaster.

The giant with the bad taste in armour who just tried to kill Yuno, and the Sarian Empire soldiers who were his men. They should be the reinforcements the messenger had told me about.

The moment I understood the situation, I felt my heart beat with a 'thump'. Not from fear or anxiety, it was something else…

It felt as if all the blood in my body was boiling over. An intense anger that surged up from the deepest parts of my very being.

My mouth spouted out some foul words as usual, but my mind didn't have the intention to stop it at all.

It was impossible for me to act rationally at this point. Save Yuno. Annihilate the enemies in front of me. These thoughts bounced back and forth in my head, I couldn't think straight.

When my anger towards Ritzert had reached its climax was the moment I felt *him* appear. ***'Kill him'*** thoughts like that flooded into my mind like a tidal wave, and I was overcome with a sudden lust for bloodshed.

I thought that it felt abnormal, but this was just how I supposed to be… wasn't it?

How could I not give in? It was unbearable, holding these feelings inside me, they had to get out.

I threw out another provocation, I decided it would be better to just defeat Ritzelt in a duel.

Although I wanted to beat him, wasn't I using a bit too much strength? I could feel the blood rushing to my head.

A flurry of flames shot towards me. I jumped out of the way to avoid a direct hit, only for spears of ice to come flying towards the place I landed at.

But easily I swept them off with my sword.

His magic invocation speed was extraordinary. One after another spells were launched towards me without interval. Each spell's accuracy and power first class.

It looks like his title of 'The Magician' wasn't a lie.

Although I wasn't sure I could cope with it with my sword skill, I was somehow able to avoid his magic with evasive manoeuvres. It was probably due to the distance, but conversely, that meant that I couldn't narrow the gap if I wanted to.

I did have a way of stopping his 'tricks', but even so, it'd be useless if I couldn't even advance a step.

I had tried jumping straight towards his chest before, but Ritzert intercepted my charge with magic. It was only natural to assume that something similar would occur if I tried again.

So what if I restricted his actions with magic?

Changing my strategy, I switched to attack magic, but it was useless. My opponent was more familiar with magic than I was.

But I had to make use of what I had.

Neither of us were able to land any fatal attacks.

We were just repeating moves over and over again. The thing was, I was specialised in close quarters combat, which meant I needed a moment to close the gap to Ritzert, who was a magician.

Moreover, I was already fatigued and injured from the previous battles, while he was in almost perfect condition.

It was obvious who was at the disadvantage here.

And that wasn't even everything, I still had *one* more thing holding me back.

Ritzert unexpectedly lowered his hand, releasing the magical power he gathered there as he gazed at me in disgust.

"Did you choose to fight me despite the obvious result? You can not win against me."

"By all means, keep sputtering fatass[1], and I'll slit that neck of yours."

"You still don't understand the situation you're in? But I guess that's what makes you brat."

An ugly smile broke out on his face, and I felt a chill run up my spine.

Ritzert released a rain of icicles towards me, but I wasn't his only target, they were sent flying towards Yuno as well, who was still treating her colleagues.

"Damn it!"

Cursing, I swept off the icicles while releasing the spell <<Dust Storm>>, and for those that still got through, I destroyed by swinging my sword at high speeds.

But it wasn't enough, I couldn't block them all.

Fresh blood splattered onto Yuno's face.

Her expression twisted in shock as her face was dyed vermillion. After confirming that she wasn't hurt, I pulled an icicle out of my right shoulder.

I lost a lot of blood.

Intense pain ran through my arm, I wouldn't do this normally.

But the blazing anger I could feel burning throughout my body made it hard for me to think straight.

Ritzert. That guy, ***kill him.***

That thought, I couldn't get it out of my head.

Maybe this was how *he* would've answered…

(That's right… you've been with me since the beginning, haven't you, Harold?)

I had lost a lot of blood, so it was amazing that I could still think as clearly as I was.

Ever since the moment I first entered this world, all those times my body moved without thinking, all those times my mouth said things I didn't mean to say…

(That was you, wasn't it?)

Its no wonder my mouth was so foul. I always found it weird how I was able to reproduce the movements from the game so easily.

For better or for worse, I was being influenced by the will of the original Harold. Maybe this is why the mediocre existence known as Hirasawa Kazuki^2 could adapt to this world so easily.

So what will happen to the consciousness that's in control right now? Will I be swallowed up by the original Harold, or will my personality overwrite his? Or will a new persona be born from our two identities mixing together?

(I don't know about such things, and I don't care.)

I don't have the time to think about things I don't know about. There's not even any proof that this hypothesis of mine is correct.

However, if Harold truly is still alive within myself-

(Harold Stokes, lend me your strength! You're the reason why your body is hurt now, your plan didn't go the way you wanted it to, and it's all that guy's fault!)

That is Harold Stokes. A selfish, arrogant, piece of trash bastard you could find anywhere.

Someone like that would never forgive someone else for saying this even if they were in the wrong. His pride was hurt, so Harold won't give up until Ritzert is dead.

"Oh? Have you given up? It's only natural that this result would come to be, but you're only a brat, so how about this? If you apologize and swear allegiance to me, I might forgive you."

Was he so convinced of victory to make such a proposal? Even if the situation wasn't the way it was now, there's no way in hell I'd accept that offer.

"I'd rather choose death than become your subordinate, I follow no one."

"…so you were a foolish brat after all."

My vision was blurry, and I couldn't steady my breathing. I was bound to collapse if I kept pushing my body the way I was now.

I have no choice but to settle this with the next attack.

Behind me more and more people were starting to get up after having received healing magic.

"Get out of here already, you bastards, you're nothing more than obstacles in my way."

"But…"

"I won't repeat myself, Tasuku will be troubled if your identities were to be found out."

Yuno was silent for some reason. Perhaps she was weighing which was more important between myself and the Sumeragi family.

Isn't that stupid? There was absolutely no comparison between the two.

"…understood, but please, at least accept this."

Yuno accepted with a bitter face, but before leaving, she used what was left of her magical power to cast healing magic on me. I think I heard her mutter something like "I so sorry Erika-sama, but…"

To be sorry for healing my wounds, she was probably apologising to Erika because this action was the equivalent to 'abandoning' me.

She must've really hated me for making that order.

Well, it's fine. That's just what it means to be Harold Stokes.

(…that's why, I beg of you. Harold, 'you', please lend me your strength!)

Even with all the training that I've done until now, my success rate of doing this was less than twenty percent. It wasn't something ready to be used in an actual battle.

Still, it's the only skill I have that even has a chance of beating Ritzert.

My body felt lighter, it was if the healing magic that Yuno cast on me was pushing me on from behind.

I'd rather not die, but if I lose to Ritzert and meet my end, I'm sorry.

I started running, ignoring the blood that was violently flowing from my wound.

I didn't know how this charge would end, but even so, I couldn't stop now! While receiving Ritzert's cold gaze from the front, I continued to push forward.

Magic was released to intercept me. Jump forward! Jump over! Icicles descended in the places I just was moments before.

And in the middle of the jump, icicles were shot at me for the nth time, in a position where I couldn't dodge them.

That is, 'if I couldn't move in mid-air.'

I had seen it many times in the game. I had even used this technique many times with my own character.

Imagine an invisible scaffold in the middle of the sky.

My body leaned forward unnaturally in the air, in a direction that was impossible to achieve. Ritzert's eyes weren't seeing things. I had kicked off of nothing.

I passed through his raid of icicles, accelerated by the kick. And once I was clear, I kicked off of nothing and pushed forward yet again.

<<Air Dash>>

Exactly like it was named, it was a technique that allowed one to accelerate while in mid-air. It allowed you to run in the sky, and was an indispensible skill needed to connect combos.

If you made a mistake in the timing of its usage, you'd just run straight into the enemy's attack, but if used correctly it could be used for combos as well as evasion.

And in Harold Stoke's battle style, it was an absolutely indispensable technique.

Changing the direction I was traveling by pushing down on my foot at top speed, my bones started raising squeaking sounds in complaint, while my muscles made loud ripping sounds as if they were about to break.

I clenched my teeth, raising my voice while also trying to muffle it, enduring the load that just attacked my whole body.

An irregular multi-chained acceleration in mid-air. I don't think that even Ritzert, who had experienced multiple battlefields in the past, had ever seen anything as spectacular as this.

Faster than it was even possible to react to.

I flew behind him before he could even blink.

Ritzert tried to turn around, but it was too late. I had my sword in mid-swing while I was accelerating.

His right arm was sent flying, leaving only a fresh feeling resounding within my hand.

By cutting through his armour, I lowered my sword, but by using my foot as a pivot, I used the leftover momentum from the dash to throw out a roundhouse kick and send him flying.

But I wasn't done yet.

Sword raised, towards the him who was suspended in mid-air, I let out a << Thunder Bird >> from only a few meters away. A distance which was then instantly covered with another << Air Dash >>.

From there I slashed, I punched, and I kicked. Again, and again, until I was finished.

Ritzert's brilliant armour was now a shadow of its former self. It was dented, covered with dirt, and stained with blood. While the person wearing it himself was in a condition worse than the armour.

Ten seconds. In that miniscule amount of time, fifty attacks were made.

Ritzert was launched to a height so high by then you could already call it the sky, and from a position higher than even that, there I was, descending faster than a large bird of prey, while I slashed down on his abdomen with all my might.

"Farewell."

Something similar to a crumbling sound resounded out, and Ritzert fell. I, right behind it.

The moment he crashed, a dull sound rang out, while I landed next to him.

It was silent. I could only hear a harsh breath that I couldn't recognize as my own breathing.

That's when I saw Ritzert's fingertip lifting up in the corner of my sight.

He was still breathing after that attack. He was tougher than I thought, it looks like those muscles of his weren't just for show after all.

But he was still alive. I didn't kill him, I had to finish the job.

With my consciousness in a haze, I put strength into my sword arm to strike Ritzert. All I had to do was pierce his neck.

"Ha… Harold…?"

It was a familiar voice. It was the voice of the person that I was trying to save.

Looking back, Robinson, Sid and Irene were standing there in shock. If I looked closely, Cody was there too.

Everything I did payed off. They were safe, the moment I confirmed that, my body just seemed to… give in.

But how did they know it was me? The mask that was hanging from my ear fell off as if to answer my question.

(Oh… in the midst of the fight it came loose… so that's why…)

I wonder what they thought of this situation.

Wearing the military uniform of the Sarian Empire, wounded all over, and there's also the fact that I acted alone in the middle of the battle between the Order and the Tribe.

What did such a figure convey to them?

“Wh-what are you doing…?”

Cody asked, uncharacteristically unsettled, but I was too tired to say anything but the truth.

“…this person is a Major General of the Sarian Empire, Ritzert… This raid is the work of the Empire… they needed to capture members of the Star Aria Tribe… and the mastermind is-”

I reached my limit. My consciousness was gone, I wasn’t able to kill Ritzert, and I crumbled on the spot like a doll with its strings cut.

◇ ◇ ◇

(3rd Person POV)

Inside a room, in a research facility room full of gowns and equipment that released heavy noises. There was a man sitting there while reading a report full of intrigue.

His long gray hair had already grown to his back without being particularly groomed, while his cheeks were so thin they gave off an unhealthy impression. His skin was so pale you’d think that he had never been outside before, and unfortunately, it didn’t look like he had received a decent amount of sleep. The bags under his eyes easily stood out among the rest of his unhealthy complexion.

Appearance wise he was a man living a very unhealthy lifestyle, but his face was distorted pleasantly.

“Hmm… so this mission was a failure? Though, I did secure enough samples, I’m more concerned about that boy…”

The possibility of failure was supposed to be almost zero, but there were uncertainties in the world.

No matter how much you increase your chances, you will never reach a hundred percent.

So the fact that it failed, wasn’t a big problem in itself.

But *why* did it fail?

It was because this time there was an irregular he didn't account for. Harold Stokes, a thirteen-year-old little boy.

The youngest to ever join the Order in history. Who was desperate to break military laws on his very first mission. And when everybody thought he disappeared, there he was, dressed in the military uniform of the Sarian Empire.

It couldn't have been betrayal or a mere espionage mission. They discovered detained Imperial soldiers when they found him, even a person of the Major class.

Harold's aims were unclear, but it was obvious that he was aware of the attack on the knights in advance.

He thought that the possibility of being compromised was low, but Harold was still able to get this information from somewhere.

It was even fairly accurate, just what sort of information network did he have?

"…you truly are an interesting boy, Harold. I wonder, are you going to become my strength, or will you stand in my way?"

He burst into a laughter that filled the halls, a quiet but insane smile creeping up his face.

Then, as if to interrupt my laugh, the door was knocked.

"Director, its time."

"…I'll leave right away."

As if a mask had just been put on, his facial expression changed to expressionless in an instant. All his liveliness from before, gone.

But who knows what was reflected in the eyes of his assistant, who was used to seeing him.

"Did something good happen? The Director of today seems to be more cheerful than usual."

“…well, I seem to have found an interesting test subject.”

“That’s fine, but we’re almost at the end of our current research project, so make sure not to push yourself, okay Director Justus? ”

“Oh, I know.”

Justus Freund seemed to be looking at someplace far away as the lights in his eyes faded away.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

1. Harold actually calls him a ‘Daruma(達磨)’ here, but since I couldn’t make the sentence work too well, I changed it to how it was now.
2. Hirasawa Kazuki(平沢一希), this was Harold’s name in his previous incarnation in case you’ve forgotten.

Chapter 25

(Erika's POV)

Many of those who had returned from the mission were injured. Some of them needed long-term care, but it could be said that they were fortunate none of them died.

And all of them said that Harold was the reason why they were still alive.

Yuno said that in order to buy time for their escape, Harold had challenged the Imperial Army's Major General to a duel despite being wounded all over. Once I was told so, I was suddenly driven by the urge to visit Harold as soon as possible.

I wanted to see him with my own eyes, I wanted to convey to him my gratitude.

But Harold doesn't want such things, he'd only see it as a bother.

Still, I wanted to at least convey the gratitude I had towards him for saving the people of the Household, including Yuno, himself.

However, I wasn't allowed to follow through with those actions immediately.

Only those who were at the scene at the time knew how severely Harold had been injured. It wasn't impossible for me to visit Harold myself, but first I had to wait for the Knights to return to the Royal Capital.

If I went and visited the expedition group myself, I'd only cause problems.

So that's why I headed to the Capital ahead of them and decided to wait for Harold's return.

That was the decision I made when I arrived at the Capital a month ago, but from the time that The Knight's finished their expedition and returned, two weeks had already passed.

“…am I not allowed to see him today either?”

I could feel my face twisting into a pained expression.

Yuno was stood beside me, her soft smile was the same as always, but there seemed to be a shadow over it. Although she returned as my handmaiden due to not having been injured too badly, she wasn’t the same, our master-retainer relationship was filled with a discouraged feeling.

On the day the information of the Knight’s return from the expedition became public, I tried to set up a meeting with Harold at their headquarters, but was denied entry. I’ve been visiting them every day since to no avail. He seemed to be alive at least, or else why would they interfere for this long?

Although I’m relieved to know that, the time where I’m not allowed to see him without a good reason only stretches longer and longer.

During the expedition, Harold was said to have been donning the military uniform of the Sarian Empire. I suspected that the fact that he was found like that became a big issue within the Order, developing into a troublesome problem.

Because if Harold who was supposed to be a knight of the Kingdom was indeed wearing the military uniform of the empire, it was inevitable for them to doubt him.

Perhaps it was taking a long time to prove his innocence.

While thinking about what hardships Harold was going through, I went and visited the Order’s Headquarters again today.

“…you’re here again?”

After seeing Yuno and me, the soldiers at the gate made tired faces.

Every day for two weeks straight, I’ve been begging them to let me see Harold, and although I don’t think I’ve pestered them for that long, it’d probably still be tiring to deal with.

I’m sorry for having to put you through this again, but I have to,

“Good day Lowry-san, would it be possible for me to see Harold-sama today?”

“Haa… Just like what I said last time, he’s not allowed any visitors.”

Today is also no-good.

It would be inconvenient if I stayed here any longer. After all, Lowry is just doing his job.

But as I was turning around to leave, a man called out to me from the side.

“Oh, what’s this? Is there something wrong?”

The man who had gotten all of our attention when he walked in had a facial expression on that could only be described as giddy.

“Oh, it’s just Cody, what’re you here for?”

“Well, I thought I saw Lawry-kun bullying an innocent little girl…”

“I have done no such thing!”

“Joking～ Joking～”

The man named Cody broke out in laughter.

After seeing such an interaction, it was probably safe to say he was Harold’s superior officer. A man whose very being could be described as ‘loose’, from his expressions and clothes to his warm atmosphere.

Even if she had had her face hidden at the time, Yuno still had contact with him before, but luckily there’s no indication that he’s noticed. Despite this, Yuno decided to play it safe and not talk in front of him, just to make sure.

As I thought about such things, Cody turned towards me while ending his conversation with Lowrey.

What he said next was unexpected.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Cody said so while pointing at the Order’s Headquarters. In other words, he was saying it was okay to enter.

“Hey, Cody!”

“Is it really okay?”

“Of course it is! I mean, you’re Harold-kun’s fiancée, right?”

“On paper, yes, that’s how our relationship is. How did you know that?”

“I know because I’m actually Harold-kun’s boss, and he always boasted about how proud he was of yo-”

“Please excuse me for interrupting, but that’s a lie, right?”

“Ah… um, yeah.”

I cut-off his explanation mid-way, but I didn’t feel bad, I knew that Harold wouldn’t say such things.

Cody, whose words had been obstructed, obediently admitted his lie.

“Well, the fact that I’m his boss is true, so is there anything you want to know? If I can answer you, I will.”

“I’ll take your word for it, Cody-sama.”

I already knew, so I didn’t have to worry if he was lying or not. Lawry seemed to decide that it’d be best if he just pretended to not be affiliated with us, “If something happens, take responsibility for it yourself.”

After this Yuno and I were taken by Cody to a reception room used for visitors. He said that we should wait here while he prepared some tea, quickly leaving us alone.

Barely after I sat down on a chair, there was a knock on the door, was he back already?

But before I could answer it, the voice of someone I wasn't expecting came out.

"I'm entering."

The moment the owner of the voice saw me, he quickly grew stiff from shock. It seems that despite his usual calm facade, he does have times when he can be surprised and show more emotions.

"I heard that you were hurt, but it looks like you're fine, Harold-sama."

"Haa~ Really?"

Sarcastic remarks came flying the moment he recovered from his rigidness. Same as usual.

Though he seems to be a lot healthier than when I exchanged words with him last time in the Sumeragi Household.

"You're alive…"

"Yeah, I am, now what do you want?"

Harold was now face-to-face with me. This wasn't good, but I couldn't just turn away from him!

I revised my posture and dropped the tone of my voice to make sure nobody could listen in from outside.

"You safety has now been confirmed, I thank you for your assistance on this matter."

I sent my line of sight towards Yuno who was at my side. Picking up on that she smiled and bowed her head in thanks.

Thankfully, Harold seems to have planned for everything.

"Unnecessary…"

“I apologise, although I was aware of how inconvenient this would be for you, I just wanted to see you and confirm it myself.”

“…”

Harold was silent.

All of my worries and gratitude were just to fulfil my selfishness. Harold didn’t have any obligation to receive it, and I don’t think he will.

But it’s fine. Just being able to see Harold’s healthy state was enough of a reason to visit the Royal Capital.

It’s true that I don’t want to bother Harold, but my feelings are my first priority. So as to satisfy my desires, I made him explain everything to me, even though I didn’t really care about what happened. The very fact that he was having a conversation with me put me on cloud-nine.

On the other hand, I felt depressed at how immature of a person I was since I’d never be able to support Harold like this.

“Is that everything you wanted to talk about?”

“N-no I… nevermind.”

I tried to stop Harold, who was already standing up to leave, but caught myself. I didn’t have any more words to say to him.

That’s just how it was.

I answered facing downwards, my gaze still locked onto Harold. I’ve always been chasing it, but his back constantly seemed to be out of my reach.

“In that case, let’s finish this already. I won’t be able to act freely as long as you’re here, bastard.”

“Thank you for letting us use up your valuable time.”

“Don’t bother me if you understand, and next time try not to get

involved with that stupid man.”

“Of course, next time I’ll… huh?”

Next time? Does that mean he expects me to come and visit again?

Then why? Why did he keep me away this past while?

He only said two words, but I couldn’t think straight anymore, and I don’t think he’d very happy if I just started spouting out questions.

Whether he was aware of my feelings or not, what he did next blew away all of my expectations.

As if it were a passing whim, Harold put his hand on top of my head. He didn’t stroke it or anything like that, it was more like he just placed it on my head with a light pop.

His hand, which I had just felt for the first time, was very warm.

“That scolding of yours from before was somewhat helpful, so I’ll commend you this once… Erika.”

That request I made to Harold back in the mansion, asking him to rely on someone. That desire I wanted for him.

I wonder if my feelings had supported him back then, even if it was only a little.

Without minding the me who was still too stunned for words, Harold left the reception room, but I only came to my senses once I heard the door close with a bang.

“…just now, he said my name?!”

Once that realisation dawned on me, I felt like my heart was going to explode. My body temperature rose to the extent that I swore I could feel steam coming out of my ears.

Harold had touched me with his hand. He touched me of his own accord.

He called me by my name for the first time. Not ‘you’, or ‘bastard’, but Erika.

I held my mouth with my hands, crouching down on the spot to hide my face.

There was no way I could show this face of mine to Yuno, who was like an older sister to me. This face of mine that was dyed redder than the sunset, with tears of joy travelling down its cheek.

◇ ◇ ◇

(Harold’s POV)

“Wanting to talk more just because you haven’t seen each other in a long time. Don’t you know guys who move too quickly are hated?”

The one speaking was Cody, the mastermind who had led me to the room Erika was waiting in before running away.

Like hell I needed him to do that!

Mentally, I was the same age as Cody, but physically I was still a child. There wasn’t much I could do against such an opponent.

When I threw a kick upwards towards his crotch, he was regrettably able to prevent it before it landed.

“Bastard, that’s your idea of helping me? Don’t do unnecessary things.”

“We wouldn’t have let her in normally, you know? For the past two weeks, she’s been requesting a meeting with you at the front gate every day, we couldn’t just leave her.”

Two weeks had passed since the expedition troops had returned home. Although it was safe to say it was all over, it only truly hit home after Erika visited to say her thanks.

If more people in the world were like Erika, then the world would surely be filled with compassion.

Although the probability of my death would also spike along with it.

“Leaving sweet Erika-chan all alone like that…”

“Shut up already. In the first place I’m supposed to be under house arrest, I shouldn’t have been able to meet her.”

“Usually you are, but today’s the day your verdict is decided.”

“…I didn’t hear about any of this.”

“Of course, because I only told you right now-”

This time I threw out a high kick to his face, but this one was blocked as well.

I clicked my tongue.

“Tell me about such things sooner, idiot.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to worry about anything. I properly explained everything at the conference room, about how you successfully defeated the Empire’s army alone, drastically reducing the number of casualties among the Order as a result.”

Instead of a punishment, won’t you be receiving a reward? Cody cheerfully added.

But in reality, I could only see that as a flag statement.

(Idiot, don’t start planting flags right after I worked so hard to avoid one.)

At that moment when I retorted in my head, I had received my flag in a record time.

A voice called out to me from behind.

“Hey, kid!”

…bastard, who’re you?

“I’m the representative from the conference room, and you’re Harold Stokes, correct?”

“Yeah?”

“… I was told that you were under house arrest.”

“This was only temporary, I’ll be returning immediately.”

“No, that’s no longer necessary.”

The man from the conference room told me to wait where I was.

He then took out a parchment from a cylinder container that had a string hanging from its bottom. Opening it up so that I could easily see it, he read out its contents.

A desperate situation was written there.

『Harold Stokes, the aforementioned is hereby sentenced to execution by beheading. On suspicions of being a foreign spy, and for withholding information on the Imperial Army’s raid, he shall be punished as a traitor, as the one who forfeited the lives of those who could have been saved.』

“This is our official decision. The punishment shall be carried out one week from now, and until then you shall be detained in the prison held beneath the conference room. Come.”

After overcoming the biggest crisis I had ever experienced, an oversized death flag was waiting for me.

Translated by KuroInfinity. Written by Izumi (泉).

A/N: This is the end of part two. Next chapter will be the start of part three.

Credits

My Death Flags Show No Sign of Ending

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